

BY ELEANOR CARROLL CHILTON
AND HERBERT AGAR
FIRE AND SLEET AND CANDLELIGHT
THE GARMENT OF PRAISE

BY ELEANOR CARROLL CHILTON
SHADOWS WAITING

BY HERBERT AGAR
MILTON AND PLATO

THE GARMENT OF PRAISE

THE NECESSITY
FOR POETRY

BY
ELEANOR CARROLL CHILTON
AND
HERBERT AGAR



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P R E F A C E

"Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."—SHELLEY.

"We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto."—MATTHEW ARNOLD.

To many people, such statements must sound vaguely, distantly true—true, in that there is little temptation to deny them, but false as well, in that they remain uncomprehended and unapplied. This book attempts to make their truth immediate and clear, by showing what poetry seeks to accomplish, by illustrating this from the history of English poetry, and lastly by suggesting that in spite of its present shortcomings poetry may prove as valuable in the future as it has proved in the past.

The book divides, therefore, into three parts. First there is a discussion of the nature of poetry, in which we attempt a clear statement of the purpose and the methods of that art. But before any such statement can take on richness and true meaning, it must be illustrated; so the second part of the book is a treatment of some of the major figures and trends in English poetry, from Saxon days to Victorian. Throughout this section, poetry is considered in relation to history and to the implied moral comments of the poets upon the world as they saw it, rather than from the narrowly æsthetic point of view. Finally, the third part of the book is an attempt to relate the poetry and the general life of to-day in such a way as to help in understanding both of them. The nature of contemporary civilisation, the part which poetry is playing in that civilisation, and the part which it

should play therein, are some of the questions considered in section three.

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The authors alone, of course, are responsible for the opinions expressed in these pages.

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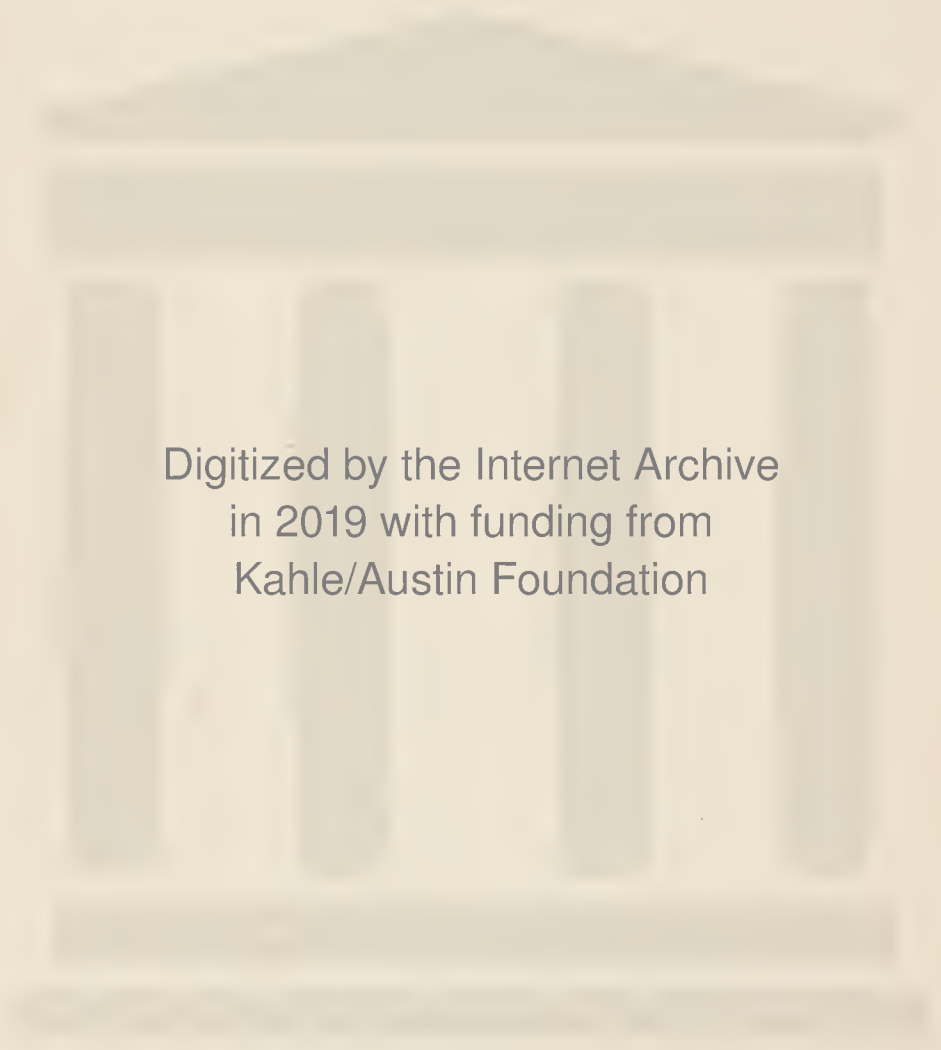
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PART ONE
THE NATURE OF
POETRY

*NOTE: The following chapters are by Miss Chilton:
Part One, Chapter Two; Part Two, Chapters Two
and Five; Part Three, Chapter Two.*

*¶ The following chapters are by Mr. Agar: Part One,
Chapter One; Part Two, Chapters One, Three, Four,
Six and Seven; Part Three, Chapter One.*

Chapter One

THE TYPES OF POETRY

That knowledge only which is of the real and the invisible can make the soul look upwards, and whether a man stares at the heavens or blinks on the ground, seeking to learn some particular of sense, I would deny that he can learn, for nothing of that sort is matter of true knowledge.—PLATO, *Republic*.

I

The attitude which underlies the poetic view of life is expressed in this quotation. To Plato, as to all poets, "reality" means not the dubious and shifting world of sense impressions, or matter-of-fact, but the perdurable world of the spirit, whose truths are those things which the imagination has tested and found satisfactory, things which may therefore endure, since they are not subject to laboratory proof on one day or disproof on the next. However, there are always people who believe that "reality" is the external world which can be felt or heard or looked upon. For them, the rest is moonshine. It naturally follows that their truth is scientific truth—meaning the body of hypotheses and tentative conclusions which men of science have put together on the basis of their experiments, and which is subject to change without notice whenever it is discredited by a new test or by a more useful hypothesis. This view as to the nature of truth is especially widespread to-day, when many people have learned some of the conclusions, but none of the humility, of science. It is the view of the common sense man, who admires science because it deals with "facts," but who considers philosophy and poetry as elaborate forms of

nonsense.¹ It is a view that creates, unconsciously, a world of flux, where "nothing is but what is not"; for the world of science, useful as it is, has nothing to do with ultimate truth or with any form of knowledge which can bring peace to the spirit of man. It is engaged in the laudable attempt to observe and to explain the operations of nature, and in so doing it has often been able to predict and control natural forces in ways which have proved of benefit to man. That is very well; but it is where science stops that the province of poetry or religion begins. There is no meaning to the world of science. Things happen as a result of causes which are ingeniously described, but they happen without meaning. Poetry and religion must suggest that meaning, and by doing so must satisfy what is probably man's fundamental need. The human race proved that it could live for a long time in a world without chemistry or a just knowledge of the size of any star, but it becomes daily more doubtful whether it can survive in a world without meaning.

To return to the quotation from Plato: "That knowledge only which is of the real and the invisible can make the soul look upwards." "The real and the invisible"—behind that phrase lies the essence of the poetic view of life. Poetry affirms that reality and truth are to be found in the sphere of the ideal, of the creative imagination, and that there is not only no necessity, but no excuse, for confining ourselves to the realm of physical fact. It is not that the poet is indifferent to the findings of science; it is merely that he is aware of their inadequacy. Much of his interest and passion

¹ Compare the following, by Mr. H. L. Mencken, in the *New York World* for August 14, 1927: "The truth is that philosophy, like its brother theology, belongs to a relatively early stage of the development of the human mind. . . . The rising tide of exact knowledge engulfs it precisely as theology is engulfed. It cannot survive facts. But there is a type of mind that still clings to the philosophical way of thought. It marks the sort of man who never grows up. One such man, carrying the infantile taste for games into maturity, is found on the golf links. Another writes poetry at the age of fifty. . . . Yet another devotes himself to the moony speculations of the philosophers."

are of course lavished on the external world, but even when he seems to be exclusively preoccupied with that world he regards it as an adjunct to the world of the spirit, not as a system in itself. For example, Milton was keenly alive to the scientific accomplishments of his day, and kept himself well informed in regard to them. He was particularly interested in astronomy, and knew that the Copernican system was superior to the time-honoured Ptolemaic one, and that it had already superseded the Ptolemaic among informed people. He would never have denied the claims of the new astronomy to scientific truth, and yet, when he wrote his great poem of creation and the fall of man, he pictured a Ptolemaic universe. He did this because the old system was easier to handle in his epic, and was also rich in associations and tradition—whereas he knew that for a poem attempting to treat the destiny and the moral purpose of man, the truth or falsity of his astronomy made no difference at all. And still Milton honoured science, and strove to understand it; but he knew its place. He would not have tried to cure his blindness by means of poetic intuitions, neither would he have tried to nourish his soul on the dusty answers from a laboratory.

There is no reason, of course, why the man of science may not find true beauty in his work. His spirit may be as nobly stirred by analysing a piece of rock as by climbing a mountain. But in that case science is considered as a means toward a poetic end, toward a quickening of the imagination and an awareness of value. It is only when science is considered as the means toward truth that its answers become dusty. For science can not reveal truth. It can describe the circumstances under which, in the physical world, events take place. Such descriptions may help man to predict and to control the workings of nature; applied practically, they may enable man to travel with pleasing speed from New York to Cairo, or to recover from a disease which would otherwise have proved fatal. But neither the reaching of Cairo nor the continuation of

life has, in itself, any value. The value must come from the imagination, or the spirit; and science is here but a convenient means to an end which it can neither define nor modify.

Instead of recognising this fact, and seeking for value in the one realm where it can be found, we have adopted the opposite attitude. "Belief I define to be the healthy act of a man's mind," said Carlyle; but he meant spiritual belief, and not our modern blind faith in any utterance from a laboratory. Because organised religion has in some cases allowed itself to become tied to dogmatic assertions about the physical world, and because modern science has made dogmatism in that realm silly, there has followed a twilight of all the gods and we believe in nothing except the one thing that can not even pretend to deal in finalities—science. A man reads in his morning paper that it has been "discovered" that sun spots are caused by solar storms, or whatever it may be. He at once "knows" that this is true, although he has never seen a sun spot or never previously heard of one. The same man would reject as moony nonsense the affirmations of Wordsworth or St. Francis about our spiritual kinship with nature, although he would accept a biologist's account of man's relationship to a fish. Now the latter may possibly be false; but the former is surely true to any one whose imagination has once encompassed it. Faith in the former is the type of belief which is the healthy act of a man's mind, whereas the lay public's uncritical acceptance of the latter is idolatry and superstition.

I say "the lay public," because of course the attitude I have described is not that of the genuine man of science, who is one of the just prides of the modern world. With a humble spirit, a plastic, critical mind, he goes about his task of seeking to understand the physical realm, and he must be equally disgusted by the ignorant claims made in his name and by the ignorant attacks of people without either spiritual or mental capacity.

It is a misfortune that organised religion, which should be an ally of the spirit, seems to be forever breeding people whose spirituality is so bound to physical forms that they must rush to the defence of outmoded science. For such is what the external world of the Bible represents—the primitive science of Arabian nomads. And if the dogmas of Christianity were all brought up to date and expressed in the terms of our present physical theories, it would not be long before new scientific hypotheses precipitated, among the heathen, a new conflict. New Fundamentalists would be convinced that only in a Darwinian world could the spirit operate, and new Menckens would be crying out that these Christians are a set of scurvy fools, still claiming that the world is round when every sane man knows it to be triangular.

Fortunately, poetry is exempt from these unseemly wrangles, and in that respect at least it may claim to be a truer servant of the spirit than religion. The poet is free to honour, and to strive to understand, the man of science; for even if some one proved that Sir Isaac Newton wrote Shakespeare and that Mount Olympus was a hole in the ground, the poet would not feel tempted to abandon his spiritual life. No matter who else forgets to distinguish between truth and the physical appearances of things, between the realm of meaning and the realm of half-apprehended flux, the poet and the lover of poetry can not forget.

2

Poetry, I have said, is concerned with the realm of the real and the unseen. Yet for the most part it must deal with this in terms of the seen. In fact, poets as a class have been particularly notable for their love of the visible world and for their fellow-feeling with it. To show how both these statements can be true it will be necessary to analyse the poetic process.

The first and most obvious statement that can be made

about poetry is that it is an art whose medium is *spoken* language, language used in such a fashion that the sound is of very great importance, as well as the sense. Properly speaking, poetry does not exist until it is read aloud, any more than music exists until it is played. The musician may learn to read a score and derive pleasure therefrom, and it is possible to read poetry silently and still with profit. But that is only because the reader is suggesting the sound to himself by means of his imagination; and no such suggestion can equal the reality. Rhythm, rhyme, euphony, tonality—all the paraphernalia of poetry show that here is language which is meant to be *heard*.

Now the difference between language heard and language which is merely thought is that the former has the sensuous quality of sound and that it can therefore make an appeal to the emotions directly, quite apart from its thought content. So on this lowest level we can say that poetry must at least be language used with regard for its sensuous appeal, used partly for its own sake, and not only as a means for conveying ideas. These two functions of language may be found in any proportions. The thought content may be all-important, and the sensuous appeal slight—as in much of the Eighteenth Century English poetry; or the sensuous appeal may usurp most of the attention, and the ideas be so tenuous as to approach the vanishing point—as occasionally in Swinburne. Such poetry is little more than virtuosity—the use of language to evoke nebulous and unattached emotion, profitless, without meaning, but strangely sweet to one who can experience it. As an example of what I mean, I refer to Swinburne's "Ballad of Dreamland," which begins:

I hid my heart in a nest of roses,
Out of the sun's way, hidden apart;
In a softer place than the soft white snow's is,
Under the roses I hid my heart.

Why would it sleep not? Why would it start,
When never a leaf of the rose-tree stirred?
What made sleep flutter his wings and part?
Only the song of a secret bird.

As restrained melody this would be hard to surpass, and unquestionably the whole ballad has a charming effect when read aloud; but it is almost without thought content, either in the ordinary sense of those words or in any higher and strictly poetic meaning. We happen to know how the ballad was written. The refrain, "Only the song of a secret bird," came first to Swinburne, and he decided to fit a poem around it. He succeeded strangely well; but his success illustrates the possibilities and also the serious limitations of this which I have called the lowest level of poetry. Many people can derive a keen and enduring pleasure from verse of this type, and it is important not to underestimate it. But it is still more important not to overestimate it, to recognise it always for what it is, and not to be beguiled into ascribing to it the dignity and worth which attaches to the higher spheres of poetry.

It will be noticed that my description of this type of verse as "language used with regard for its sensuous appeal, used at least partly for its own sake," etc., is not a definition, in that it does not necessarily exclude prose. But all I was trying to do was to point out the primary and most obvious quality which must be common to all poetry, and I then turned aside to observe that some poetry had this quality and little else.

Important poetry, however, has a great deal else, and it is in seeking to describe this "else" that we come first upon hazardous ground. It is probably impossible to describe intelligibly all the qualities of poetry—witness the inconclusiveness of the many essays on this subject. So I warn the reader in advance that what follows does not pretend to be complete. . . . Poetry, when it aspires to be more than mere

sensuous appeal, mere melody and emotional excitation, must obviously increase its proportion of thought content; but it is in defining the nature and qualities of this thought content that the difficulty arises. If it be nothing other than the type of thought which could be put in prose, then it most certainly should have been put in prose. There is no excuse for dressing up a prose idea in the trappings of another art. Either the idea will be obscured by a form which can add nothing to it, or else it will be cheapened and robbed of subtlety by the attempt to overcome the difficulties of expressing it clearly in an alien medium.

Both these results—but especially the latter—can be illustrated from the poetry of Pope. In the introduction to his "Essay on Man," Pope describes what he is trying to do in this work, and then adds,

This I might have done in prose; but I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious: that principles, maxims, or precepts, so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards: the other may seem odd, but it is true: I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself.

Deplorable reasons for turning to poetry! To be sure, Pope describes his work as "verse," and if by that he means merely to imply that it is metrical, without claiming that it is poetic, it would be ungracious to quarrel with him. But even in that case it is worth pointing out that if the system of ethics which Pope was expressing had merit or profundity to begin with, it would surely have been ruined by being forced into verse. A great poet may be assumed to have a system of ethics, but he will not attempt, in poetry, to give it dogmatic or systematic expression.

And spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

The verse form makes that a memorable and an epigrammatic statement—which is perhaps all that Pope would have

claimed for it. But the verse form does not make it even faintly poetic, and it does preclude any chance of doing what little justice might have been done to the idea which lies behind the statement. When Pope wrote, "This I might have done in prose," he condemned his work as harshly as any critic could do.

What, then, is the type of thought content which is proper to poetry? Before describing this, I must attempt to make clear what I mean by the words *spirit* and *spirituality*. The words will be used throughout the book, and I must define them with some clarity if I am to avoid the impression of flabby meaninglessness which the words often convey. In what follows I am trying to state, not what *spirit* means to other people, or what it should mean, but merely what it does mean in this book.

It is convenient to divide all things of which we are aware into an outer world which we perceive through our senses and an inner world of which we are more directly and mysteriously cognisant. Both of these worlds may be considered in two ways: either as abstracted material for the intellect, or as something coloured and conditioned by the imagination also, and by the emotions with which we naturally confront them. A tree, for example, is a convenient symbol of the outer world. As material for the intellect, the tree will present problems of a botanical nature, such as its classification; or it will present philosophical problems, such as whether or not it has objective existence apart from the mind of an observer; or it will present questions of utility, as from the point of view of a lumberman. In all these cases, the tree has been considered by the mind alone.¹ But as soon as it is considered in the light of the entire personality, instead of the intellect alone, the tree ceases to be merely a problem

¹ Strictly speaking, "the mind alone" does not exist. It must always be conditioned to some extent by the rest of the personality. What I mean by the phrase, of course, is the mind when it is operating as detachedly as possible.

and becomes a source of value and knowledge. The imagination suggests countless associations with the tree, investing this collection of sensory images with depth and richness. The tree becomes a metaphor for life itself, suggesting at one moment the "light-leaved spring" and at another the "bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang." Meanwhile the beauty of the tree will have made an appeal to the emotions, and this too will have been reinforced by association with remembered beauties, and with the idea of perfection. Any one who has experienced a tree to this extent will think of it no longer as an abstraction, but as a personality whose nature, if understood, has much to teach the sensitive observer. . . . The point of all this is that the tree could not have been understood so long as it was considered materially, by the mind alone. The tree as material, or as fact, was the tree as it was perceived by the intellect. The tree was not *known* until it was considered by the entire personality—mind and imagination and emotions co-operating and producing an intuitive awareness of the truth about the tree. This truth is spiritual truth; and when I speak of a spiritual attitude toward external reality, I mean such an attitude as I have here described. It is characterised by that harmonious co-operation of the faculties which makes possible intuitive knowledge, by a sense of value which comes from a perception of the relations between things, and from a free indulgence in the tendency to find a symbol of a larger perfection in the discrete beauties which surround us.

This same distinction between an intellectual and a spiritual way of viewing something is applicable to the phenomena of the inner world as well as of the outer. The emotion of love, for instance, may be considered as a purely material problem, as a question of glandular balance or blood chemistry, and a study may be made of the physical changes which precede, or accompany, or follow, this state. But love may also be considered in the light of the imagination and the

emotions, in addition to the intellect,¹ in which case it too will become a source of value and knowledge, as it does in Plato's *Symposium*. This is the spiritual treatment of love, and its fruit is a direct perception of love's meaning—and behind that there may even come a glimpse of the meaning of all fair things whatever, and hence a partial revealment of one of life's secrets.

To sum up, then, a man can only view life spiritually in so far as his intellect and his imagination and his emotions are harmonious allies. If his nature is at cross purposes with itself, or if any aspect of his nature is temporarily disregarded, the spirit suffers. But when the spirit is functioning freely, things are perceived in the light of a larger relationship and a larger meaning than alone they could embody; this is the contribution of the imagination. At the same time, things are coloured by the emotions which they have evoked, and which in turn evoke forgotten echoes; in this way again things become more significant and more far-reaching than, perceived factually, they could ever be. Lastly, the intellect will insure that the imagination and the emotions between them do not produce a picture that will be inconsistent or ridiculous. But the standard of inconsistency will be set by the entire nature—the spirit—rather than by the mind alone.

The wild winds weep
And the night is a-cold;
Come hither, Sleep,
And my griefs unfold:

¹I am not here attempting any tripartite division of the personality, such as Plato's. I am merely using the words intellect, imagination, and emotion to describe three aspects of the personality. A problem in geometry is solved by the intellect; fear is an emotion; it is with the imagination that a poet creates a metaphor, such as "the mellowing year." I am aware that this is a rough and unscientific division, and that no one of these qualities is ever found at work in a pure form, untinged by the other two. But still, there are unquestionably times when each one of them is uppermost, and there are other times when they work together on a more equal footing. This is all I am seeking to suggest.

But lo! the morning peeps
Over the Eastern steeps,
And the rustling beds of dawn
The earth do scorn.

This, to the unaided intellect, is absurd; but to the spirit it is not.

If a man has attained to the harmony which I have been describing, and if he is living in the light of all his capacities, his sense of values will differ so widely from that of most people that he will be regarded as madly erratic and as driven on by forces other than those which commonly inhabit mankind. This is a mistake. The spiritual man is not a peculiar prodigy; he is man in a simple and healthy state, man as he was intended to be. Most of us have allowed one side of our natures to crowd out or dwarf the others. We are men of intellect, refusing credence to anything not subject to logical treatment; or we are emotionalists, or sensualists, or something of the sort. In any of these cases we can never grasp "that knowledge which is of the real and the invisible," for such is attainable only by the spirit, which, being many-sided, can find meaning behind the appearances of things.

I hope that in my illustration of the tree I showed what is meant by "the real and the invisible." This phrase does *not* mean the abstract, in the sense that a mathematical equation is abstract. The tree is a physical reality. But the tree as seen by the spirit is both a physical reality, with purely physical properties, and an imaginative and emotional reality, with character and meaning and value, none of which could be perceived or expressed in purely physical terms.

It will be seen from what I have written that the spirit tends to accomplish two somewhat contradictory results. On the one hand it is highly personal, in that it sees and values things in subjective terms; but on the other hand it is impersonal, in that it strives to relate things to a larger whole. The tree, as I have said, when it is perceived by the spirit,

takes on a metaphorical richness, becoming a symbol for aspects of the life process. This is a subjective way of viewing the tree, at least in its origin—for a vital metaphor will always find its source in the individual's most personal experience. However, having once conceived the metaphor, it is possible to de-personalise it, making the tree into a symbol, no longer of one's own life, but of life itself, losing one's sense of identity in the cosmos which has been momentarily grasped. In this way the spirit may end by merging into a larger whole not only the objects of the outer world but of the inner subjective world as well. This is the tendency which results in mysticism, a loss of personal desire and personal values in a vision of ecstasy and completeness. It is obvious that such a state of soul can not be maintained steadily. The spiritual view of life may be continuous, but the mystical extreme must be an occasional experience. When the spirit has lost itself, and all else, in mysticism, it has become temporarily abstract, inexpressible in terms of human value, bodiless and white.¹ But for the rest, the spirit is warm and many-coloured, concrete and vivid as experience, and it is partly to avoid any confusion between spirituality and abstractness that I have undertaken this long digression.

It is now possible to answer my question as to the type of thought that poetry will embody. It will embody spiritual thought, thought which is in some way the product of the entire personality, and it will eschew the abstractness of purely intellectual thought. We have seen that the distinction between spiritual and non-spiritual has nothing to do with

¹ Thoroughgoing mysticism, in the sense in which I have just defined that word, is not found in poetry, because it is impossible for poetry to become truly abstract. Whatever the subject matter of a poem, it will be presented at least partly in terms of life and of life's warmth and immediacy. I do not believe that the mystical transcendence of that immediacy can be expressed in language at all. All that can be done is to suggest, indirectly, the quality of mystical experience; the rest must be supplied by the reader. When a poet like Blake is called mystical, the most that can be meant is that Blake's spirituality sometimes goes further along the path of the abstract and the impersonal than is normal for a poet.

the distinction between the outer world and the inner. Either of these realms becomes non-spiritual in so far as it is treated by the intellect alone: love, to the intellect, becomes a problem in chemistry; a tree, to the intellect, becomes a problem in science or epistemology. On the other hand, either of these realms takes on spiritual properties when it is viewed by the entire personality. So viewed, the two realms tend to merge; and the distinction between outer and inner world is of little importance to the poet.

Perhaps what I have said about the thought content of poetry will be made more clear if I compare it to the thought content of metaphysics. It is characteristic of metaphysics to deal with its material as non-sensuously as possible. It wishes to avoid emotional bias and to exclude acts of the imagination which are not explicable in terms of the reason.¹ Therefore, it will normally consider only those aspects of an object, or a situation, which lend themselves to intellectual treatment. The tree, to a metaphysician, suggests the problem of knowledge: How can we tell that there is such a thing as a tree? *Is* there such a thing, when the observer turns his back? Even if these questions could be answered definitively, no advance would have been made toward apprehending what I have called the truth about the tree; that can only be known by the spirit. Metaphysics, and even logic, because of their abstractness and hence their impersonality, because of their freedom from the limitations of everyday experience, may liberate and refresh the spirit; but the methods of these disciplines, and the type of thought which is cultivated by them, are not normally what I have described as spiritual.

¹ The metaphysician uses his imagination in raising problems, such as that of epistemology, but he attempts to follow logical patterns of thought in dealing with these problems. And logic is the negation of imagination. Logic might almost be called a travesty on thought, seeking to simplify the rich, multi-form activities of the mind until they can be subjected to the law of contradictions.

Three examples of poetic thought—of thought which is all compact with emotion and imagination and which therefore produces an effect differing in kind from any possible effect of prose—will, I hope, illuminate what I have been saying.

I marked all kindred Powers the heart finds fair:—
Truth with awed lips; and Hope, with eyes upcast;
And Fame, whose loud wings fan the ashen Past
To signal-fires, Oblivion's flight to scare;
And Youth, with still some single golden hair
Unto his shoulder clinging, since the last
Embrace wherein two sweet arms held him fast;
And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear.
Love's throne was not with these; but far above
All passionate wind of welcome and farewell
He sat in breathless bowers they dream not of;
Though Truth foreknow Love's heart, and Hope foretell,
And Fame be for Love's sake desirable,
And Youth be dear, and Life be sweet to love.

I have chosen this sonnet because in it Rossetti expresses an idea about the inner subjective world. This is just the sort of thing which lends itself most readily to abstract, philosophical, intellectual statement. If it had been so conceived by Rossetti, it would have been a prose idea, and no amount of rhyme and rhythm and word beauty could have made it poetry. But it was not so conceived; it came into his mind rich with association, clothed in imagery, coloured with emotion. Hence it must have been expressed in poetry, if at all. There was no choice of mediums, such as Pope naïvely suggests. There is no way in which this particular idea could be expressed in prose, though it might have been expressed in unmetrical, unrhymed language. It is not minor points of technique which make these lines poetry; the poetry arises from the quality of the conception underlying the poem. Love's throne, says Rossetti, is "far above all passionate wind of welcome and farewell." That is a poetic idea; and

when such an idea is expressed, the medium of expression will be poetry.¹

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;—
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again!

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work
And o'er the sickle bending;—

¹ In other words, the poetic idea is indivisible from the expression thereof. It is because of this fact that poetry is untranslatable. "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love": that is a simple statement, unmetrical, and without rhyme or ornament. Yet it is poetry, and hence it can not be expressed in prosaic terms, or in French, or in any form save its own. For the form *is* the idea, and once the form is changed the idea no longer exists. This fact is made clear by comparing Shakespeare's simple poetic sentence with an equally simple prose sentence, such as "please pass the salt." This request can be expressed in many ways, because it does not embody even the smallest artistic intuition.

I listened motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Here Wordsworth has taken a simple scene from the external, physical world, and has described it in such a way as to make it a spiritual event—or rather, in such a way as to show that it actually was a spiritual event, if truly seen.¹

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Underlying these remarks about the nightingale is one of the deepest affirmations of Keats's spirit—the immortality of beauty—and yet it is expressed wholly by means of images and recollections of the world of fact. . . .

So far I have distinguished two types of poetry—a poetry of virtuosity which uses the sensuous resources of language for the production of little besides an emotional effect, and a more valuable poetry which uses those same resources for the purpose of presenting life bathed in the colours of the spirit. For convenience I shall name this the poetry of vision, because its foremost characteristic is what Mr. Santayana calls “the disenchanting and re-enchanting faculty of seeing this world in its simple truth.” In poetry of vision the formal, conventional attributes, associations and interre-

¹ I do not mean to imply that the Highland lass, as here described, need ever have existed in the external, physical world. Wordsworth may have imagined her, or may have read about her. But the poem is nevertheless a record of spiritual experience which has been stirred by, and attached to, the material world.

lations of objects are dissolved by the poet's clairvoyance, and those objects are then presented to us as they really are, or better as they really were when the bloom of the old, lost garden was still upon them and they were seen naïvely in their truth.

However, there is still a higher poetry—the poetry of the prophets, of Dante, of Milton. It may be described as poetry written by a man who combines the virtuosity, and the sensitive unconventional awareness of external fact, and the spiritual nature, of the poets of vision, with a clear and self-proving picture of the ultimate meaning of life. His world will be a cosmos, complete, satisfying. In it the significant and beautiful parts perceived by the poet of vision will be related to a significant and beautiful whole. Rossetti and Keats for instance can add value to life by reading it in the light of their own spirits; yet they know no answer to the ultimate questions. They are groping towards “the great Fact of Existence,” to use Carlyle's phrase; but they have not found it. On the other hand, poets of the class I am now discussing have such an answer. Looking at the world, they see it whole, and whether their vision corresponds to ours or not, their work will have a quite different effect upon us from that of any other poets, if we give ourselves to it. It is poetry of this class which best fulfils the description that Mr. Santayana has given: “Poetry is a momentary harmony in the soul amid stagnation and conflict—a glimpse of the divine and an incitation to a religious life.”

Of course, although the reader—in order to profit by this last type of poetry—need not share the poet's beliefs and accept his affirmations, it is necessary that he find beauty in these beliefs and affirmations. For instance, if the Catholic view of life as presented in Dante, or the Protestant as presented in Milton, is ugly and distasteful to a reader, and if it remains so even after he has read *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*, there is no use in assuring that reader that

he ought to enjoy such poems more than any others. There are certain ways of feeling about life which are inherently repugnant to certain people, and poetry can not always overcome this repugnance. Nevertheless, it will usually be true that a poet whose work is based upon an organised, and an organising, view of life, will move us more deeply and fruitfully than an equally gifted poet who lacks such a view. Hence my belief that poetry of this third type is more valuable even than poetry of the second.

The Hebrew prophets are the most generally known examples of poets of this order. To be sure, their works are written in a highly rhythmic prose; but there is nothing about formal metre which makes it a necessary element of poetry. We can only say that it is the usual accompaniment of poetry, since it is one of the readiest ways of attaining part of the poetic effect. Yet it is possible for semi-metrical writing, such as much of the Old Testament, and for quite unmetrical writing, such as the dialogues of Plato, to attain all the essentials of the highest poetry.

Again in the name of convenience, I shall call this last type, which I have just been describing, the poetry of prophecy. Prophecy, of course, is not used in the sense of foretelling but in its other meaning of interpreting, or speaking-for, something. The poetry of prophecy interprets the universe; it tells the meaning of the world, or—in another phraseology—it tells the will of God. The two things are the same.

Throughout this attempt of mine to analyse and classify poetry, I have written as if the poetic process were a more conscious thing than it is. Of course no sane poet, on being moved to write, ever said to himself, "I shall now interpret the beauties of the autumn season in the light of my own spirit and my own yearnings," or "I shall now tell the public something about the will of God." The poet writes because there is something within him which requires expression. He has usually no clear knowledge of what it is that impels him.

In fact, it seems to be true that the more self-conscious the poetic process becomes, the less valuable it is. The preliminary work must all be done on a deep and primitive level, far below the plane of conscious ratiocination. Poetry which is written from the surface of the personality, which is motivated by the conscious desire to say this, or to express that, will be of slight value.

There is one partial exception to this statement: the poetry of prophecy will often be written in accordance with a conscious purpose to throw light upon the meaning of the world. For at least fifteen years before he started *Paradise Lost*, Milton was steadily aware of the desire to write a great religious poem, a poem which in one fashion or another would "justify the ways of God to man." But he did not know what form this poem would take, or in what story it would be embodied. It was not until all such things had decided themselves on the unconscious level that he could begin to write; and it is one sign of his greatness and his integrity that he waited through discouraging years instead of beginning before his whole self was ready for the task. . . . So even the poet of prophecy is self-conscious only about the purpose and larger meaning of his writing. For him, too, the major part of the process is uncomprehended.

Wordsworth is the best illustration of this fact. Wordsworth was a poet of prophecy, when he was anything at all. And the difference between Wordsworth the great poet and Wordsworth the silly fellow is the difference between Wordsworth writing from his whole personality and Wordsworth writing from the conscious level only. Like Milton, he knew that he had a mission. There was a way of seeing the world, of thinking and feeling about it, which he had grasped, which he knew to be good, and which he must express. But unlike Milton, he frequently did not wait for the inner and unconscious harmony necessary for spiritual expression. Again and again his urge to say this thing which he so well under-

stood and so deeply felt, drove him to expression when there was nothing to express except the material in his conscious mind—except prose thoughts, in other words. The result was wretched stuff—metrical discourse, metrical philosophy—usually inferior to the same kind of thing in Pope. Long passages from *The Excursion* illustrate what I mean. Yet Wordsworth was a great poet; and on other occasions, when all his being was co-operating, he could proclaim his message—which in his uninspired moods he merely parodied—with a simplicity, an ease and directness, as suggestive of inspiration as anything in literature:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man;

Or again,

There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

I have discussed Wordsworth at some length because he well illustrates the difference between unconscious and self-conscious poetry. But unfortunately most poets have furnished examples of the two processes. Mr. Housman seems never to have attempted poetry until the preliminary unconscious work was done; and probably the same is true of Baudelaire; Milton had the grace to put most of his superficial verse in Latin or Italian—but such tact is rare.

Here the following question may arise: If poetry-writing is largely an unconscious process, if the quality which distinguishes "Tintern Abbey" from the worst parts of *The Excursion* is produced by a part of his nature which the poet can not directly control, what is the use of dragging this process up into the light, of analysing it, of saying that it does this or does that, of classifying it and giving the classes names? The chief value of this type of analysis is not for the poet—who will certainly follow his own instincts without much care for theories—but for the reader of poetry. The mere vague feeling that poetry is good, that time given to it is both pleasantly and profitably spent—which is all that most poetry-lovers bring to their reading—is not enough. Just as the most elementary knowledge of painting enables the student to see more in the world about him, to be aware of previously unrecognised beauties in any landscape, so a knowledge of the method, and of the possible richness, of poetry will tend to have a similar effect upon the reader.

I once stood beside a landscape-painter on the slope of a hill in the White Mountains. We were looking down a valley which to me seemed beautiful, but subdued. My friend spoke of it as "all ablaze," and when I asked him what he meant he began pointing out the colours which my untrained eyes had either overlooked or else had blurred together into an unexciting neutral shade: red and yellow of wild flowers glinting through the long grass in a field where I had seen only green; bright blue, and dazzling sunlight on patches of a stream between tree trunks at a great distance; a huge brown-red splotch on the side of a hill where there had been grading for a road, and behind it a thunder-coloured cloud shouldering its way above the mountain; the entire landscape a profusion of colours, shifting, glittering, revealed and hidden again before my eyes could isolate them;—as my friend talked I grew surprised at my obtuseness. I had been standing in the midst of a wild modernist painting—but I should

never have discovered it by myself. . . . I believe that such an awakening to unregarded beauty and subtlety may be effected by learning something about the poetic process, about what to expect from poetry, and where to look for it.

3

Throughout Part Two of this book, considerable attention will be given to the historical situation in each of the main periods discussed. In order to make clear why this is done, and what it is intended to accomplish, I shall consider here the general question of the relation of poetry and history.

This phrase, "the relation of poetry and history," may be construed in two ways: it may mean the relation of the poet's work to the history of his own day, or it may mean the relation between the two ways of presenting human life—the poetic and the historic. I shall deal with the latter question first.

Aristotle's famous statement that poetry is truer than history becomes the more remarkable when we consider that Aristotle must have had in mind such history as that of Thucydides, who wrote of events that he had witnessed and of men whom he had known and studied for years, and who was notably concerned with finding the meaning and the motive that lay back of events. No one could dismiss his writing as a mere record of physical happenings; he made every attempt to picture the relation between external events and the ideal world behind them. Even so, Aristotle considered poetry a more truthful rendering of life, and such a conclusion, on the part of a scientifically minded philosopher like Aristotle, is impressive.

A comparison between Thucydides' picture of the Peloponnesian Wars and Homer's picture of the siege of Troy, will help to explain this judgment of Aristotle. Thucydides devoted much time to creating the most accurate possible account of the Peloponnesian Wars, and since he himself was

a commander in the wars, and since he spent years travelling about to interview witnesses of the various events he describes, and since many of the chief actors were his friends or acquaintances, it may be assumed that his account is reasonably correct as far as external details are concerned—especially in view of Thucydides' quite modern veneration for accuracy. But in spite of all this, a reader of Thucydides' history finds himself unable to answer the one really important question in regard to the whole matter, namely, what sort of people were the Athenians to whom such things could happen? Athens was at the height of her intellectual and artistic career. Pericles died, not an old man, two years after the wars broke out; and Plato was born the year Pericles died. Socrates fought in several of the campaigns, and his greatest work came in the five years following the wars. Euripides was about fifty years old when the wars began, and Aristophanes was about forty when they ended. If we consider the works of these men, we are likely to picture Athens as the most gifted of cities; but if we turn to the pages of Thucydides we find what seems to be the story of a venal and unworthy race. And this is due to no bias on the part of the author, for Thucydides knew his contemporaries too well to have any such opinion of them.

What is the relation between these two cities? The historian of facts can not give it. The most detailed knowledge of the events of these terrible years would never suggest to any one that here was the story of one of the most spiritually and artistically endowed of people, and the story of those people during the period of their greatest creativity. Had the Acropolis at Athens been destroyed by volcanic upheaval, and the works of Plato and the tragedians perished with it, there is nothing that we could learn from the historians which would teach us that Athens was of greater importance in human history than Corinth or Thebes. . . . There is something seriously amiss, then, in the account of life which is

given by history—and that something is the inadequacy of the picture of “the real and the invisible.”

If only we had a poetic account of Athens during those years of war to compare with the account of Thucydides, we might make helpful deductions; but lacking that, the best we can do is to contrast our knowledge of another period of carnage, a period about which we know almost nothing except a poet's story—the Trojan War. History can not reconstruct the “true” account of those misty days, and so we do not know the probably sordid details of a commercial war between the last stronghold of a once great Mycenæan world and a group of upstart barbarians from the north. All that we know with any clarity is to be found in the Homeric poems, where the causes of the war are presumably idealised, and the deeds of the heroes are perhaps quite without basis in fact, and the jealous interest of the immortal gods is too flattering to be easily credited. And yet, is it not true that we know everything needful about that Trojan War? The sorry facts, if we had them, would probably distract us from the important truths. We know how these long-haired Achæans felt about life and death; we know what conduct they considered base, and at what shrines they worshipped; we know where they found beauty, and the pleasure that it gave them, how they bore sorrow, and to what dear illusions they were loyal. Would it really profit us to add a knowledge of the economic causes of that long adventure? A truly modern, “scientific” account of the war, an account which had no nonsense about it—nothing suggestive of immortal desires or immortal pain—such an account would be an unnecessary addition to Homer's.

I have given these illustrations in order to suggest the following conclusions: first, that history without poetry may be dangerously misleading, and should not be accepted as a basis for important judgments about human life; second, that poetry of the highest order may without any historical addi-

tions tell most of the relevant or permanently valuable truths about a society. This, and the many implications of this, are what I believe Matthew Arnold to have meant by his famous statement: "Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth."

If these things be true, why is much attention given throughout this book to the historical background of the poetry discussed? I seem to have been proving that historians should know poetry; but why should those wishing to derive the best from the poets bother to learn history?

The first reason is that only the very greatest poetry can illumine its age without the help of history. Homer may stand alone, and possibly Dante,¹ but in English literature not even Shakespeare is so pre-eminent—for there are strange omissions from Shakespeare's picture of the inner life of his age. In Homer we get all that could be asked for, and in the Hebrew prophets; but as the centuries pass and the world grows steadily more individualistic, the poets need to be supplemented more and more if we are to understand either the developing story of man or the full import of the moral comment which the poets make upon it. So it is in this light, as a supplement to the study of poetry, that I wish to present history. Since in the modern world poetry can no longer embrace most of the activity of man, as it did in the simpler, more communistic ages of Argos and Palestine, it is important to learn as much as possible, from other sources, about the external story of a period if the full value of its poetic testament is to be had. And since, with the lethargy which has fallen upon religion, man's moral comment upon the life which he is experiencing is found in his poetry more than in any other form of expression, and since the moral comment

¹ Dante's picture of the *external* life of his age is of course both inadequate and distorted. And yet I believe that a juster knowledge of the Thirteenth Century may be had from the *Divine Comedy* than from any prose histories of which I am aware.

of an age is its chief legacy to the future, the value of this study is considerable.

My statement as to the worth of historical knowledge as an aid to the understanding of poetry may be made to appear much exaggerated if it is applied to isolated lyric poems. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Arnold's "A Summer Night,"—these poems seem quite able to stand alone. And of course they are so able; in fact, it might be difficult to show in such individual cases just what would be added by the fuller knowledge for which I am arguing. But the difficulty diminishes if, instead of taking separate poems, we consider the poets themselves. Shelley, Wordsworth, Arnold—much pleasure and profit may be had by studying them *in vacuo*, as isolated works of art, but I believe that the later chapters of this book will show that their full import can not be had without a knowledge of history.

An illustration of this may be found in English poetry of the age of Pope. A knowledge of this poetry alone would, it seems to me, lead the reader to conclude that here was a smug, material, and rather vulgar age, which valued cleverness and ingenuity above imagination, and which was incapable of any deeper moral emotions. But that would be at best a half-truth. For the secret of the age of Pope—and for that matter of the generation which preceded him—was that here was a society worn out and spiritually exhausted from the tremendous effort of the previous hundred years. Between the birth of Spenser and the death of Milton—a little over a century—England had been torn by the passions of the Renaissance and the Reformation and a far-reaching political and social revolution, all happening at once and all experienced intensely. The age of Dryden and the following age of Pope were too tired for any further strife, or any further spiritual and imaginative crises; hence they took refuge in a tranquil and worldly intellectualism, safe out of the reach of anything ultimately important. And in the narrow path to which they

confined themselves they accomplished splendid things; but those things were in other fields than poetry. Even so, however, with a knowledge of its historical setting the poetry of the Eighteenth Century becomes, not more poetic, but far more valuable and significant. Much may be learned from it, about the human spirit, if one comes to it with an understanding of why it is so insufficient.

So far I have been discussing history and poetry as two ways of presenting the human story, and I have tried to suggest the relation between the two. But there is another way in which poetry and history should be examined: there is the effect upon the poet of the events of his own day. How far is a man's poetry conditioned by the spirit of his times? To what extent is it bound by the limitations of the particular age? One of the chief purposes of this book is to suggest answers to such questions; for before modern poetry and the modern world can be made to throw much light upon each other, it is necessary to know what sort of relationship may be expected between poetry and contemporary history. The second section of this book, discussing the story of English poetry from the beginning down through the centuries, and considering it both as the poet's moral comment upon life and as a picture of the way in which the world about him limits, conditions, sometimes even guides, the life of his spirit—that section of the book is a necessary prelude to any detailed consideration of these questions. For the present I shall make only one general remark.

The most cursory glance over literary history shows that poetry is surprisingly faithful to the dominant tendency of its day. I can think of few important poets—Browning, probably; Blake, perhaps—whose work it would be difficult to date with fair accuracy by its prevailing spirit and without any help from language or pronunciation or topical references. . . . Byron stands in his small boat on Lake Geneva, welcoming the tempest as it beats about him:

Most glorious night!
Thou wast not meant for slumber, let me be
A sharer of thy fierce and far delight,
A portion of the tempest and of thee.

He is as properly a part of revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe as he would have been unthinkable in the not-long-dead Europe of the Seven Years' War. Arnold, lamenting that "the sea of faith was once, too, at the full"; Milton, striving to justify the rigour of his unforgiving Deity; Pope, with his verses that he might have done in prose; Spenser, with his sentimental Neo-Platonism in unholy union with Calvinistic zeal—when could any of these spirits have come into the world, except approximately when they did come? They might have varied a few years one way or the other, perhaps; but no more. Scarcely anywhere in English literature can we find a poet with originality enough to be a thoroughgoing anachronism.

Just what the meaning of this observation may be is something which, in our present ignorance of psychology, seems unknowable. We can only say that it appears true in poetry, as in all else, that no man can deny his environment. A Shelley and a Pope can never be contemporaries, apparently—though it would be a rash critic who would undertake to explain precisely why.

4

It may seem strange that I have leaned heavily on Plato in my general discussion of poetry, and that I have referred to him often as a great poet, in view of his notorious decision to exclude most poetry from the ideal Republic. That decision can not be dismissed, as many writers have tried to dismiss it, as the foolish lapse of an otherwise great mind. On the contrary, it is a plausible, and perhaps an inevitable, decision, if understood as Plato intended it; and I do not see how any one can feel that he is justified in claiming an ex-

alted place for poetry until he has faced Plato's arguments and in some fashion made terms with them.

In considering Plato's criticism, it is important to bear in mind that his conclusions are intended to apply only to an ideal state, to the commonwealth of his imagination where "philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy," where perfect justice resides, and perfect harmony, where the rulers and the warriors and the artisans each perform their allotted tasks adequately and with contentment, where the disorders attendant upon wealth and poverty are unknown, where even the problems and the miseries of sex have been conquered. It is from such a society that most poets are to be banished, as introducing a disorderly and unworthy element into the education of the young men who are being trained as future rulers.¹ And also it must be kept constantly in mind that Plato is a moralist and a Puritan; that is to say, he has ever in view a moral ideal, and anything which interferes with this must be discarded ruthlessly, no matter how enchanting it may have proved to the senses. The ideal can best be expressed in his own words:

Let each one of us leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only, if peradventure he may be able to learn and may find some one who will make him able to learn and discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life as he has opportunity. . . . A man must take with him into the world below an adamantine faith in truth and right.

Plato decided that poetry would not avail the citizens of his ideal state in following this "one thing only," and it is

¹ This ideal Republic, it must be remembered, was pictured as inhabited by ordinary men and women, such as we know in the actual world. The state was ideal because it was perfectly organised, and because harmful elements were carefully excluded, and because education was perfected, and because in such a state the best and wisest of the citizens would be willing to rule. But sooner or later, Plato admitted, mortal deterioration must overtake even that perfection. It was the duty of statecraft to postpone the evil, to protect the citizens from their own native weakness—hence the banishing of that type of poetry which might create a desire for something different.

noteworthy that many other Puritans, from his day to ours, have come to a similar conclusion. It has been the tendency of defenders of the arts to brush these others aside as ignorant fellows with no æsthetic capacity; but Plato—one of the finest artists in history—can not be so cavalierly treated. To my mind, there are only three reasonable stands that the defender of poetry can take. He may say that this high quest for the knowledge of good and evil and the capacity to choose always the better life is *not* the primary concern of man; in that case poetry, like the other manifestations of man's spirit, is sadly diminished in importance. Or he may simply admit that poetry is of no assistance in this quest; in that case it sinks to the level of harmless amusements. Or he may assert that, whatever might be the state of affairs in an ideal Republic, Plato has not shown that in the actual world poetry is of little service to man's spirit. It is this last opinion which I shall defend.

What, exactly, are the bases of Plato's criticism? In the first place, he starts with a distinction between two worlds—that of reality and that of appearance, the ideal world in which things exist in their perfection, and the external world about us which is peopled with none-too-adequate copies of the objects in that fairer world which he considers real. He then denies that poetry is what I have asserted it to be, namely, an illumination of that second world in the light of what the poet has learned within his own heart about the first. He insists, rather, that poetry is a mere copy of the second world—a copy of a copy, therefore, and “thrice removed from the truth.” In making this accusation, Plato is purposely taking the lowest possible view of poetry. He is identifying it with the poetry of virtuosity, the poetry which, for all its charm and appeal, can not rise genuinely above the world of fact because the quality of vision is not in it. Now it is true enough that such irrelevant playing with the imagination and the senses has no place in a perfect state whose citizens have

found "the better life." In the imperfect world that we see around us, such relaxations and divertissements are of true value to those who have learned to enjoy them. But it would be a mistake to make any high claim for such poetry, of which Poe's "Ulalume," Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott," Swinburne's "Ballad of Dreamland," are examples.

Why Plato should insist, in the tenth book of the *Republic*, on identifying all poetry with this comparatively unimportant sub-division of the art, it would be hard to say. But as far as the present argument is concerned it is only necessary to point out that such was not Plato's usual opinion. Any one who is familiar with his many references to Sophocles and Æschylus will be aware of that; and in another part of the *Republic* itself, Plato speaks as follows: "This power of elevating the highest principle in the soul to the contemplation of that which is best in existence, . . . this power is given, as I was saying, by all that study and pursuit of the arts which has been described." Clearly, if poetry can have such an effect, it is not always the earth-bound thing, the "copy of a copy" which in the tenth book Plato accuses it of being. And if it is not always "a copy of a copy," then this first argument of Plato's is no valid attack upon poetry as a whole, but only upon a certain class of poetry.

So far, then, Plato has merely excluded from his ideal state the form of poetry which we have described as of little spiritual value, although charming. His next point, however, is a more serious one. He claims that poetry usually stimulates and feeds the sensuous, passionate side of man's soul, instead of the reasonable, thus producing a weak and erratic nature rather than a firm and wise one. "Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue." This is the view which underlies most of the Puritan distaste for the arts which recurs through the ages; and there has always been a tendency

on the part of the artist to dodge this issue by saying that even if the Puritan accusation be correct it would make no difference, since art is an end in itself, a good in itself, and can not be judged with reference to any external value. . . . Strangely enough, this view has been held by some quite sensible people. Presumably, such people have felt strongly within themselves the value of art, and so have made the intuitive and sound judgment that it is a good thing; then they have encountered the criticism of the Puritan, and being incapable of meeting it on intelligible grounds they have withdrawn from the contest, claiming a foul. The Puritan attack is an unfair one, they allege, since it would apply standards which are inapplicable. Strange that they should abandon the field with such smug contentment! For if poetry can not meet the Puritan standard, when that standard is intelligently applied, then it is scarcely worth arguing about at all. For the Puritan—represented in the present instance, and at his very best, by Plato—states that poetry is likely to be of disservice to man in his search for a true knowledge of good and evil, since it subjects his higher nature to his lower, feeding his passions and thus increasing his subjugation to the illusions of the flesh. To answer this attack by saying “No matter” is worse than silly.

I believe that poetry must down this charge of being harmful, or at best useless, to the life of the spirit, before it is worth any one's while to write, or read, a book about it. In a sense, this entire work is an attempt to point out the extreme value of poetry to such a life; but since the body of the book will answer the Puritan criticism only by implication, it is worth while, here in the introduction, to consider that criticism in some detail. First I shall discuss Plato's reasons for bringing this second accusation, and then—more briefly—the reasons of later Puritans.

Plato's statements can only be understood by referring back to the fact that he was discussing an ideal city. He himself

had a high regard for poetry; he himself was a poet; and he admitted that in the actual world this art could promote the highest principle in man's soul. And yet he banished most poetry from his Republic, saying that it fostered unduly the passionate side of man's nature. His reason is quite simple. One of the services, in the world about us, of the poetry of vision is that it promotes an emotional discontent with un-beautiful or unspiritual ways of life, or societies—creating a nostalgia for a dimly felt and far-off loveliness. This may amount to nothing but sentimental indulgence, which is of slight value. But it may—and as experienced by true lovers of poetry it does—help to build up an unquenchable determination to make at least some proper effort to capture a larger share of this desired quality in one's own life. Such is one of the effects—upon people of spiritual receptivity—of poetry like Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," Swinburne's "Atalanta in Calydon." But poetry of this sort *might* be experienced as mere emotional excitation, and in that case it would be harmful, instead of desirable, in Plato's Republic. Where the good has been attained, and the far-off beauty has been captured, of what use to arouse unremunerative longings? The passions can always be played upon by a skilful artist, and can always be made to yield desire and discontent; but the evocation of such discontent in a world which can not be improved would be an immoral practice.¹ So in self-defence, and while admitting all their charms, Plato was forced regretfully to send such poets home.²

Notwithstanding this, let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation, that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered state we shall be delighted to receive her—we are very conscious of her charms; but we may not on that account betray the truth.

¹ It must be kept in mind, as I stated above, that the inhabitants of this ideal state were real men and women, out of the world as we know it.

² Their works *could* be of value, but they could also be an evil; and the ideal state must be protected from every avoidable danger.

So much for the poetry of vision. I think it is clear why Plato excluded it, and why his exclusion is compatible with our enthusiastic acceptance. What, then, of the poetry of prophecy? Such poetry Plato would admit. "Hymns to the Gods," he says, "and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our state." Clearly, in a perfect city, these two varieties of poetry are the only ones which could be considered of the highest order. "Hymns to the Gods," wherein the beauty and the perfection as well as the meaning of the world would be rendered; "and praises of famous men," wherein the citizen's loyalty to his perfect commonwealth, and his admiration of its accomplishments, would be reinforced. . . . In our actual world, the poetry which corresponds to these hymns to the Gods is such poetry as I used to illustrate my highest class—*The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Ecclesiastes*, etc.¹

It will be seen, therefore, that there is nothing in Plato's criticism of poetry incompatible with the high claims which I have been making for it. The only important attack Plato makes is on the ground that poetry fosters the lower—the passionate or sensuous—nature of man at the expense of the higher. This is sometimes true of an inferior poetry, and in an ideal state it would be true even of very fine examples of the poetry of vision; for in such a state there would be nothing to gain from the emotional appeal of an "Ode to the West Wind," and there would be much to lose in the way of serenity and firmness. But even in his Republic Plato welcomed the poetry of prophecy; and in our world it seems clear that he would be equally cordial to the best poetry of vision.

I shall turn now to the criticisms of later Puritans. One of the most interesting of these is found in Tolstoi's *What Is*

¹ I should include Homer's works in the above list of poems of prophecy, although Plato excludes Homer from the Republic. The reason for this exclusion was that Homer gives an unworthy and degrading picture of the Gods; but for us the Olympians are not real enough to be blasphemed against.

Art?—a book which has not met with the consideration it deserves, probably because Tolstoi's application of his own theory, in the course of the book, is so ill-considered that it has discredited the entire work. Nevertheless, the theory should not be ignored, for it raises questions of significance to any one in whose life art is of major importance. I shall briefly outline Tolstoi's position, and then discuss the implications thereof.

The question *What Is Art?* is usually answered, according to Tolstoi, by the statement that art involves the creation of beauty. What, then, is beauty? Tolstoi says that there are only two answers to this question: either beauty is conceived of objectively, as a manifestation of the highest perfection, and hence as in some way related to goodness and truth, or else it is conceived of subjectively, as that which produces upon the individual who is experiencing it a disinterested pleasure—a pleasure, in other words, which does not involve profit or gain. Tolstoi dismisses the first of these definitions as silly, and then comes to the obvious conclusion that if beauty is merely the production of pleasure, art can not be chiefly concerned with the production of beauty. "People will come to understand the meaning of art," he asserts, "only when they cease to consider that the end of that activity is beauty, i.e., pleasure." The next stage in his argument is to seek a true definition of art, to take the place of the false definitions which involve the creation of beauty. "Art," he decides, "is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others the feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them. . . . It is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings." The question at once arises as to what feelings should be transmitted by art; for though the transmission of *any* feeling be art of a sort, it is clear that according to this theory "good" art will be the transmission of

“good” feelings. Tolstoi discusses this question, and concludes that there are only two kinds of feelings which art should be praised for transmitting: “First, feelings flowing from the perception of our sonship to God and of the brotherhood of man; and next, the simple feelings of common life, accessible to every one without exception—such as the feeling of merriment, of pity, of cheerfulness, of tranquillity, etc.”

All this can be summed up in four propositions:

- (a) Art is not concerned with beauty, because beauty is merely a quality which gives a certain type of pleasure.
- (b) Art is the means by which man transmits his *feelings*—as opposed to words, by which he transmits his *thoughts*.
- (c) The most desirable feelings are those associated with the brotherhood of man, and the “simple feelings of common life.”
- (d) The best art is therefore the art which transmits such feelings as these *to the greatest possible number of people*.

The first comment to be made on this is that the entire creed rests on the rejection of beauty as the objective of art, and that the rejection of beauty rests on Tolstoi’s definition of beauty. *If* beauty is merely a pleasure-giving quality—so that any work which fills anybody with a disinterested pleasure is, for that person, beautiful—then we should have to conclude either that art is not of primary importance, or else that art is not to be defined in terms of beauty. For the mere evocation of disinterested pleasure, i.e., pleasure which does not happen to be associated with concupiscence or the desire for gain—such evocation is not a very great matter. Whiskey will do this for many people, and a game of tennis for many others; but neither whiskey nor tennis aspires to the significance which we commonly attribute to art. However, if we define beauty as “a manifestation of the highest perfection”—a definition which Tolstoi rejects without even bothering to

argue the matter—we need no longer seek elsewhere for the meaning or the justification of art. According to this view, art is a means whereby the artist, using the materials of the world about him, transmits to other men his fleeting perceptions of absolute beauty. This is nothing but another way of expressing what I said above in trying to define poetry; for absolute beauty is a primary attribute of perfection, or divinity; it is that quality, “absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things.” To apprehend this quality may well be a pleasure; however, when the artist strives to give such apprehension a local habitation and a name, he is not seeking to impart pleasure, but rather to record how he has glimpsed, beyond the disorder of his life, a vision of harmony and completeness. This vision was of beauty, and the work of art in which he embodies it will be great or trivial depending on the degree to which the embodiment takes place. It will not matter whether such a work stresses the brotherhood of man, or whether it provokes merriment, or pity, or any other specified emotion; it will be good art if it transmits that fugitive and essential vision.

It may be objected that my definition of beauty is quite as arbitrarily chosen as was Tolstoi's. In a sense this is true; but I defend my choice on the ground that it leads to an intelligible and plausible view of art, a view which is at least in keeping with many people's experience—whereas Tolstoi's definition leads him to conclude that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is of higher worth than “Macbeth” or *Faust*.

There is, however, still another aspect of Tolstoi's theory which deserves discussion. This is the belief that good art will reach a great number of people, and that art which can only be understood by a small group will be bad art. Such, I should say, is the logical conclusion for any one who regards art as the means for transmitting a particular doctrine, such

as the brotherhood of man. It is possible that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has made more people feel kindly towards more other people than has Goethe's *Faust*—hence its superiority in Tolstoi's mind, as a work of art. Also, I should imagine that this question of head counting must seem important to any one who regards art primarily as a means for giving pleasure. Mr. Douglas Fairbanks has presumably given more pleasure than Baudelaire, and I have heard it said that he is therefore a greater artist. But such judgments will always seem high nonsense to those who hold that the subject matter of art is real beauty, and that the value of art is the effect which the presentation of this beauty—whether embodied in words or form or sound or colour—makes upon the spirit of the perceiver. I should admit that a work of art which can make an effect upon a great number of people is preferable to a work which can make the same effect, but only on a very few. In other words, ideally perfect art will have an intense spiritual effect upon every one capable of spirituality. But this does not at all imply that a work of art can be judged by its popularity. The quality and the extent of the revelation of absolute beauty is the primary test, and the question of popularity is only relevant when applied to works which are of equal value according to this test. There is no spiritual snobbery in such rejection of popular appeal as a primary test for art. The people who can not respond to *Paradise Lost* have presumably many other sources of spiritual refreshment; and their sources, in the aggregate, may be as rich and various as Milton's own. For the apprehension of beauty is fortunately not reserved to the artist and the lover of art. But on the other hand, when a critic contends that merely because a work of art is popular it must have some element of artistic merit, it is certain that he is confusing art either with the teaching of wholesome and useful lessons, or else with the giving of pleasure. In either case, he should not be taken seriously. . . .

There is one other type of Puritan attack upon poetry which I wish to discuss. It amounts to this: The lives of the poets, to say nothing of the lives of poetry-lovers and of the æsthetic fringe of society in general, are such as to refute in themselves the claim that there is any connection between poetry and the spiritual life. Before replying to this, it is necessary to decide in what way spiritual life is manifested. Modern Puritans, descending from their high Platonic ground, are strangely prone to identify spiritual life with certain bodily practices—in other words, with what unreflecting people call “morality.” Nothing could be more unfortunate; for morality—in this rigid thou-shalt or thou-shalt-not sense—has no more to do with the spirit than have traffic regulations. Such morality is a thing of expediency and social convenience. Because so few people have enough inner light even to desire to guide themselves, they are given a set of physical regulations to follow, and these regulations are given a childish awesomeness by being set about with physical rewards and punishments. All this may be necessary. It is certainly a time-honoured way of dealing with a troublesome situation; but to confuse it with the life of the spirit, or to think that its presence or absence has any necessary connection with the spirit, is something which the Puritan of all people should be ashamed of doing. . . . What, then, are the criteria of a spiritual life? In what ways will the spirit be likely to manifest itself? Mr. Santayana has suggested the following: “Concentration of thought, indifference to fortune and reputation, warmth of temperament (because spirit cannot burn clear except at a high temperature) disciplined into chastity and renunciation.” To these I would add Plato’s “adamantine faith in truth and right,” and the sensitivity which breeds true kindness. If these are in fact the qualities attendant upon spiritual life, then it is true that poetry has had upon her followers the effect that I have been claiming for her. Among poets of importance there will always be found such

evidences as these of spirituality, and of devotion to the one thing that matters. Therefore the defender of poetry should welcome a chance to meet the Puritan test of usefulness in furthering the life of the spirit—only he should be quite certain that the Puritan can recognise the life of the spirit when it is shown him. External virtue, adherence to the moral maxims of a community, may be the symbols of an inner grace and harmony, or they may be the symbols of a lacklustre compromise, or of indifference, or of a fatal common sense. Nothing can be predicated, one way or the other, on the presence of such conduct. In attempting to assess the spiritual worth of an artist's life—a risky undertaking, clearly, yet one which can not be dismissed as irrelevant to a serious defence of art—the qualities which must be sought after are such qualities as I have listed above. Where these are present in abundance, there will be rich spirituality; where they are scanty or lacking altogether, there will be worldliness; and this will hold true quite irrespective of the correctness or eccentricity of the physical activities of the person in question. I know of cases where men's lives reveal these evidences of spirituality, and where nevertheless their conduct is both unconventional and unsocial; but I know of no case where such a man's conduct is base, or low, or meanly motivated. If this seems to the reader an extravagant statement, I can only ask that he reconsider the question after he has read Part Two of this book.

Of course, if one considers the third- or fourth-rate poets—or artists of any description—one finds people whose warmth of temperament is not disciplined, whose faith in truth and right is not adamant, whose thought and energy are not concentrated, but merely spasmodically stirred. The interpretive artist—such as an actor or a violinist—is a good example of this type. It is in such circles that the alleged deteriorating effect of art is displayed; but it is not in such circles that the creative artist of importance will be found.

Chapter Two

POETRY OF EARTH AND ACTUAL POETRY

In so far as religion is an attitude of passionate wonder toward the mysterious and the unattainable, and not necessarily attached to any creed or dogma, poetry is an expression of the religious mind. There is, I think, an especial virtue in this word religion; it is an old and hallowed word, although, like all sacred things, it has been subject to many indignities; and it still carries with it a suggestion of high and noble purpose, of an effort to find unity and significance in a life which ordinarily is fragmentary, splitting itself into unmeaning particles against the accidents of time.

There is very definitely such a thing as the poetic mind, and potentially—or at least, ideally—the poetic mind is nothing more esoteric than the human mind. We are all poets in so far as we are aware of the complexity, the loveliness and desolation inherent in the mystery of being alive. We are all poets whenever we are stirred deeply by the apprehension of a beauty we cannot describe; an apprehension which is so rich with impressions and confused thought and emotion that it is truly incommunicable. We are poets when we are sensitive to the mystery that sometimes divides and sometimes unites the seen and the unseen, and when we glimpse the Poetry of Earth that is never dead, and can never be contained on the shelves of a library.

Ideally, then, every human being should at the very least be an understanding lover of poetry—an ideal which is manifestly far from realisation. And the reason lies, I believe, in the fact that *actual* poetry, with which this book is concerned, is only one manifestation of this wider Poetry of

Earth. It is the expression *in words* of the poetic mind—words so inextricably provoked by and provocative of emotion and thought, all rising together from the depths of experience, that it would be impossible for any one, even the poet who uttered them, to say which preceded which, or explain the subtle evocations, one of the other. To the maker and to the impassioned reader of poetry, words are actual and living things, having dimension, their substance almost tangible; their meanings are bound up with the quality and cadence of their sound, and for this reason it is impossible to translate or rephrase a finished poem without destroying all that makes it poetry. The idea alone is of inestimable importance to the whole; but expounded *as* an idea or thought, separated from the inevitable form and exact progression of words which gave it birth, it becomes only the possible material for another poem. Indeed, our ideas—the reasonable comments humanity has been able to make on life and the universe—phrased exactly so that they may become common property, are pitifully few. We have a dusty little heap of axioms as our universal heritage of factual thought, a heap which would be at least half again as small if we tried to sift out of it a coherent set of principles. For there is a minimum of actual subjects for real thought. Such embodiments of ideas as Justice, Life, Death, and God are constant provocations to our wonder and our desire for certainties; and the reason we have more axioms than subjects is that each conception of a question has at least two sides; and where Heraclitus tells us that in truth there is nothing but atoms and empty space, Plato affirms a “real existence, colourless, formless, and intangible, visible only to the intelligence which sits at the helm of the soul.”

It is in this province of eternal questions that poets breathe most happily, and because of this we hear constantly the cry that the day for poetry has passed; that science can give us final answers to soluble problems and that those which are

insoluble have been attacked from every possible point of view, answered with every conceivable hypothesis, whether reasonable or insane; that, in short, there is nothing new under the sun, and poetry has become merely an ingenious plagiarism.

There are many possible denials of this lugubrious cry, but it seems to me that even without exploring the philosophical implications, the distinction between ideas *per se* and ideas newly alive in words, is amply convincing. There are, I suppose, people who can read Shakespeare's song beginning "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," and find in it only another statement that everything which lives must die. Such people may vary as widely as the poles in their mentalities—they may be philosophers to whom abstractions only are concrete or men of science to whom only tangible substances are actual—but one trait they have certainly in common, and that is the lack of susceptibility to words.

For "axioms in philosophy," Keats said, "are not axioms until they have been proved upon our pulses." And if we belong to the world of poetry, if words are alive for us, we cannot fully savour an idea until we find or make words which at least suggest it; words which can bring it home to that part of our minds in which it will have the fullest significance for our individual trend of thought. And therefore poets who live with words are always showing us something new, and lovers of poetry are forever finding in their minds new and strangely exciting conceptions, brought into being by the lavish intermarriages of words.

Plagiarism, then, is only a theft of some one's words for an idea, and it may be stated dogmatically that if a poet takes over words and ideas together, he is not, at the moment, a poet, for he is not creating. He has not, even, absorbed the poem from which he is filching, for this whole principle of the eternal freshness of words springs from the indubitable truth that no impression or idea goes deeply into the individual mind without undergoing a sea-change and emerging (if it

happens to emerge) either transmuted almost beyond recognition, or at the least joined to other impressions and feelings and words with which it had no outwardly discernible kinship. The discovered kinship is due entirely to the fact that we are all highly individualised on the deepest levels of our being, however commonplace we may be on the levels that are apparent to other people; however commonplace, even, we may be on those levels that are rationally apparent to ourselves. We all face the same general problems, but no two people can view an object from exactly the same angle; and analogously no two minds can see an idea in exactly the same perspective.

Therefore, although those of us who are heirs to poetry are likely to be mistaken if we assume that we alone are sensitive to the Poetry of Earth, we know that we alone are capable of making and hearing and judging actual poetry. We can never explain ourselves to those who are aware of the "real existence . . . visible only to the intelligence which sits at the helm of the soul" but who are deaf to the poetry of words, any more than we can explain to materialists the reality of our quest. The only objective good we can ever claim for our preoccupation lies in the fact that poetry seems to us the truest record of man's search for a symmetry in life, and that in so far as it is ethically desirable that each individual should seek his own highest wealth of mind or soul, his own truth and native perfection, poetry is valuable in awakening, in quickening this desire for a best which shall be better than any hitherto ascertained good.

I have said that poetry is the truest record of man's search for a symmetry in life, and I believe with Sir Philip Sidney that "of all Writers under the Sunne, the Poet is the least lier," although we are all aware of a tenacious tradition to the effect that the poet cannot tell the truth. He can lie, says this tradition, with a truly godlike inspiration, but the very fact that the imagination is the leaven which transforms words

into poems, precludes that reasoned and tested caution which is necessary if we are to hear cold truth on any subject. If a poet tells a lie twice (so runs the saying) he will believe it.

Thoroughly to explore this evidence would require several volumes on the nature of Truth, but there is one aspect of the question the terms of which are common property and which is therefore amenable to brief discussion—that is, the difference between poetic and factual truth,¹ and the nature of the imagination. It is not necessary to quote the many definitions which embattled poets and critics have bequeathed us. They all say with varying emphasis what is intuitively known to every one who finds a deep satisfaction in poetry.

The whole question has its roots, really, in the unexplored parts of the being, in the realms of the soul, or the spirit, or the unconscious mind, or whatever it is one prefers to call those mysterious forces in us which elude definition; which have never yet been traced to any material source; which are of a piece with every wonder man's ingenuity has failed to explain. Man looks long at the universe and sees ultimately only a few apparent certainties standing naked before a colossal question mark. He looks long into himself and sees the same thing, except that in himself he finds more certainties; more worlds of impulse which are so inevitably a part of the whole which is his self, that they have an apparent reasonableness, an authenticity which is lacking in such facts as observation may assure him are true. Thus the obvious fact that we all die, and die only once, is one which he accepts; for while the question mark still looms beyond the stars, what he calls a fact is only a manner of referring to the outward phenomenon of death. But in his own mind death is a conception which can never be an accepted fact, as the least of his compulsory illusions about it would postulate some aware-

¹ "It's [poetry's] object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony. . . ."—*Lyrical Ballads* (2nd ed.), Preface.

ness on his part of the fact that he had died; a contradiction in terms which persists until his actual death solves or puts an end to the questioning.

Whatever we seek in life, we begin the search in ourselves, and in ourselves we end it, a fact which has cast a shadow across every man's days but which is also a thrilling challenge. Masfield has expressed this challenge memorably in one of his sonnets:

Here in the self is all that man can know
Of Beauty, all the wonder, all the power,
All the unearthly colour, all the glow,
Here in the self which withers like a flower;
Here in the self which fades as hours pass,
And droops and dies and rots and is forgotten,
Sooner, by ages, than the mirroring glass
In which it sees its glory still unrotten.
Here in the flesh, within the flesh, behind,
Swift in the blood and throbbing on the bone,
Beauty herself, the universal mind,
Eternal April wandering alone,
The god, the holy ghost, the atoning lord,
Here in the flesh, the never yet explored.

It is because of this, that in the depths of each human being lies all of life that he can ever know, that the poet, when he searches honestly for his true self is really searching for the universe; and if he has searched honestly, and waited for the transmuting power in his mind to give body to the bare skeletons of his impressions, he will be speaking at length, when he speaks of himself, in terms of the cosmos. For in his mind, or soul, or spirit, in his real, essential self, are manifold selves—hidden potentialities and unlived lives to which the strictures of his environment and the necessity of his conforming to some sort of social scheme have denied fulfilment. Each individual mind is a trackless mystery, a universe of lost dark worlds and swinging bright planets, and the lost worlds are really lost—worlds of observation never recorded by critical

reason, of memories that were never anchored to the conscious stream of self, of desires never admitted, or outgrown, or satisfied by compromise. They are lost to us in that we could never revisit them with the torch of knowledge or with our adult eyes, but though lost in this sense they are nevertheless very much a part of us. They are peopled worlds, where life goes on—and being within us they are responsible for what we are. They have sunk like the people of Atlantis, printing a seal on us with their fingers before the water closed over them—for now and then, by virtue of that seal of possession, we know the water has parted and we hear faint, far-lifted voices which we recognise. And it is these potential selves, these germs of different life, which every artist recovers by means of his imagination, just as the correspondent selves of the artist's audience recognise and respond to the recreations; so that one is almost at times tempted to say that all of life which is capable of being contained in any mind is potentially existent in every mind—the seeds of all thought, the basis for all knowledge.

The imagination, then, is only the power we have of stirring the buried roots of our being so that they flower in the world of common daylight, impregnating them with our controlled intelligence, so that they may become realities in words. And poetic truth is only the individual truth, the extension of all the various parts of the self; so that the imagination which enables the most amorphous intuitions of the individual mind to speak the universal language of man is thus, necessarily, the surest touchstone to this truth. The poet is nothing if he is not honest, for his only satisfaction in speaking is due to a relentless compulsion to express himself—that is, to share those realities of existence which he has discovered in his own mind. Of course this desire for sharing experience does not spring from a belief that any one else will benefit by the result, but from the poet's primal need for discovering himself; and being a poet he cannot be satisfied with the experience itself

(which is enough for the Mystic) until he has approximated and tested it with words.

If, however, the poet seeks to discover himself, it is because of that mysterious analogy between the submerged worlds of his mind and those spatially vaster worlds which encompass his body. He can never know the material world, except by making it a part of himself—relating it always to the core of intuitive knowledge and the long achievement of identity which he calls himself. The process is egocentric but not necessarily egoistic, for as we envisage it apart from any particular temperament it has much to do with self-knowledge and nothing whatever to do with conscious self-gratification. It is simply a means to an end; the surest way known to any one of getting at the truth—not the factual truth, but “those real truths of our inward nature which . . . uphold and cherish . . . our sense of actuality in a phantom universe.” In other words, the bare facts of existence, along with the whole fabric of all that we have seen, or heard, or read, or thought, or in any way experienced, are deep within us. They have not only consistently and with minute precision made us what we are and together merged into a whole; they are still capable of being separated from the whole and re-experienced. So that every creation of the mind is really a blend of the most incredibly intricate memories, some actually remembered, some really forgotten and only resurrected through the changes they have wrought on a conscious memory, on a mood or a word which happens to present itself to our thoughts. Thus, if every creation is an act of memory, every memory is a re-creation in new terms, which, one supposes, is what Wordsworth meant when he said that poetry was “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” He might have said, less neatly, that it was emotion which had been separated from its immediate source long enough to settle itself firmly in a group of related emotions, and thus to acquire a richness and a significance, a background of meaning in terms of the whole per-

sonality. Sometimes, when one is reading Wordsworth, and falls heavily from Westminster Bridge into the child's grave, one wishes that he *had* said it, by way of reminding himself.

I have gone perhaps disproportionately into the problem of poetic truth, not only because it seems to me the most fundamental issue in the old controversy of spirit versus matter—a controversy in which the whole idea and the authenticity of Poetry are involved—but also because it is only with the distinction in mind between the cold objective truths of fact and what Mr. Lowes has called “truth at white heat” that one can deal intelligibly with the venerable question of inspiration versus artistry, and with the modern prejudice against what is disparagingly known as cosmic poetry. And since I believe firmly that poetry is not worth rereading, is not poetry in the real sense of the word, unless it is both inspired and cosmic, I must make some attempt to define these terms, in order that my judgments of particular poems may seem consistent.

Now the word inspiration, as a description of the poetic process, has come under a ban of disapproval. Probably this has happened because, as an old word, it has been hospitable to the most idiotic abuses. It has somehow grown the conventional long hair, it is absent-minded, it is given to sexual aberrations, it does not vote—it has become, in strange fashion, the simulacrum of the cosmic poet who traditionally pleads his citizenship in the world of great spirits as an excuse for the omission of his more mundane duties as citizen of a geographical community. He is a child of Light. He draws poems down from the spheres as a god might wreath his brow with suns and stars. He brushes aside those who use rhyming dictionaries and quotes from the *Phædrus*: “He who, without this madness from the Muses, approaches the poetical gates, having persuaded himself that by art alone he may become sufficiently a poet, will find in the end his own imperfection, and see the poetry of his cold prudence vanish into nothingness before the light of that which has sprung from divine insanity.”

And, of course, without for a moment granting the so-called cosmic poet authentic existence, we must concede that Plato was quite right, although the Muses themselves have long been banished by laughter, and we use terms like unconscious cerebration or unconscious germination instead of divine insanity or inspiration. Inasmuch as insanity is a temporary disproportion in the personality, a momentary emphasis which destroys balance as the sufferer retreats into the dark regions where the infinite *parts* of himself are still parts and not fused by reason and ordered by knowledge into the civilised personality—in so far as this is insanity, it is also poetic inspiration, or unconscious cerebration. But Plato modified his noun; he specified that the madness was divine, and if we are not newly converted atheists we may allow the word to pass as descriptive of the intellectual factor in creative work—the conscious and critical faculty, pruning, selecting, discarding, without which the real stuff of poetry would be indeed a senseless confusion of words. Mr. Lowes, who has more articulate knowledge on this point than any one else I have ever read, has summed it up in this way: “The rich suggestiveness of a masterpiece of the imagination springs in some measure from the fact that infinitely more than reached expression lay behind it in the shaping brain, so that every detail is saturated and irradiated with the secret influence of those thronged precincts of the unexpressed.”

By virtue of this belief, when I say that real poetry is always cosmic, I mean that it is drawn from the unconscious levels of the poet's being, where emotions and ideas acquire a significance which makes them, in Shelley's words, “unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth.” It deals, usually by implication, with that “permanent analogy of things” which is the universal experience; it stirs and awakens other minds because in so far as all that we know of the cosmos is in our minds, the flashes of vision from other minds at the very least rouse in us our own parallel visions, and if the flashes penetrate deeply enough

into our minds they enrich permanently our own awareness of life.

So by the cosmic poet I do not at all mean the versifier who capitalizes abstract nouns and leans heavily upon what Coleridge (in referring to his own early, imitative work) described as "such shadowy nobodies as cherub-winged Death, Trees of Hope, bare-bosomed Affection and simpering Peace." I mean the true poet, who is always, at his best, trying to recapture a lost vision; and the chief reason that the "shadowy nobodies" need no serious condemnation is that the real poet, when he is working honestly and passionately, goes in small danger of easy abstractions. He happens almost universally, to find in the intricate simplicity of the life around him, the keenest goad to his spirit. It is not the philosophical idea behind an abstract word which rouses him to the painful consciousness that some part of him which seems immortal might find peace in certainty if only he could penetrate deeply enough into the mortal world around him. It is the visible, sensory world that stings him to longing for an invisible beauty, as if he had once known and since forgotten that the stupendous complexity of life, with its countless creatures wandering between the stars and the sands, is only the unfinished weaving of a significant pattern across the warp of the universe. And striving to come upon his lost vision, the poet uses his actual eyes as well as his whole mind, so that he is always showing us the wonder of accustomed things, the mystery that lies in the cloud, the "tiger" burning in the night, the churchyard, the nightingale, and the song of the girl reaping in the fields. The cosmic poet is only the poet who is trying to say something which is more important to him than the whole world and which, if it could be said, would be of infinite importance *to* the whole world. He is expressing in terms of his own spirit the universal spirit of man.

I can draw a very simple illustration from so highly individualised a poet as Mr. de la Mare:

When music sounds all that I was I am
Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came.

If we take these two lines to our hearts, as the phrasing of an experience we know well, it need not imply on our parts any belief in theories of prenatal existence, nor even a complete responsiveness to music. It is simply a way of saying that there are moments in life when we are lifted beyond the levels of humdrum existence, when we feel crying out of us the lost rhythms, wide knowledge, spacious thought, and keen sensitiveness to the meaning of life; and this is an experience which must have been shared, more or less frequently and intensely, by almost every one who ever lived.

Poetry, then, is the language of the spirit, and actual poetry is the attempted interpretation of that unspoken tongue in words. But if, as I believe, the authenticity of poetry is dependent upon the ability of the poet to draw up from the buried chaos of his mind "words that flash images" of truth, and if that truth is always a subjective and relative one, how can we judge or attempt even to criticise any one's work except our own? There is no rule-of-thumb measure for any art. Emily Dickinson said, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" Similarly, if a sonnet, for example, "strikes me as a wording of my own highest thoughts, and appears almost as a remembrance," I have every right to claim that it fits all the known definitions for great poetry. I may add that it seems to me "simple, sensuous, and passionate"; that to my mind it "unveils the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth"; that it is "Truth carried alive into the heart by passion" and "not melody alone but harmony"; that it "says much in little" and illumines for me "the passion, and the strangeness, and the dramatic contrasts of life" by means

of "the best words in the best order." And who would dare step between me and this barrage of great men's words, to say anything more than that he disagreed with me?

Obviously any one who cares enough for poetry to have sought tirelessly for the real thing, is sure that he knows it when he finds it. We may use varying standards when we try to explain *why* we are certain, but there is, I think, no question that the basis for our judgment is instinctive. And the only reason that we do not feel discussion and criticism to be superfluous, if not impudent, is that we have learned from experience that although the intuitive response is the primary and essential thing—that without it the superstructure would be meaningless—there is nevertheless an unending pleasure for the mind in all that follows from our first instinctive response. We all have seen our taste change; widen almost miraculously as we accumulate experience and knowledge. We have all, I suppose, been amazed at finding that some poet who has heretofore jingled meaningless words at us is suddenly, by virtue of our own growth, saying to us beautifully something we have always wanted to hear.

The primary and final standard for poetry, then, is individual and intuitive, but within the limits of these subjective standards (that is, among those who through appreciation inherit the great tradition of poetry), there do exist certain objective standards of criticism. It is probable that these criteria are in part rationalisations. They do not in any sense explain *away* the emotional experience of poetry, but they do, by defining and classifying, show very clearly the intellectual factors of the experience. And in showing these they reveal an almost paradoxical fact, for the more one learns of the history of poetry, the more one reads of the opinions and prejudices of those who have helped keep it alive, the clearer it becomes that there is an amazing uniformity of taste. At first thought, with the fact in mind that our taste is instinctive, this appears to be contradictory evidence, to point to an

objective standard; but if one remembers that the poet in creating is always, at his best, trying to word *his own spiritual appropriation of an universal idea*, it becomes clear that in so far as he succeeds, he is saying something which does not cheapen with the passage of time but will be dear to poetry lovers of succeeding generations.

This which we call the test of time is not, then, an indication that the poet has hit upon one of the luckier "rules" for writing prevalent in his own age; a rule which has happened to hold good throughout other centuries. There are no rules. There is only genius—a richer spiritual endowment than is granted most people, a greater power of imagination or ability to use this endowment, and a touch with words which colours them with meaning and makes them sing beautifully. Granted this genius, and the fact that new ideas make converts slowly, it is obvious that time should always be a friend to the poet as certainly as it is an enemy to the poetaster. Time gives the poet an ever increasing audience, and since reading poetry is always in the last analysis a creative process, it is inevitable that bombast, whipped-up emotions, surface sentiments, conventional expressions, in fact all the results of writing *from* the conscious mind rather than *with* it, are inadequacies which are felt at once by those who go to poetry for real reasons of their own.

And so although there are no rules which are binding to the poet, there are certain short cuts for the critic. They have arisen empirically, as generation after generation has shown that certain qualities are always present in what survives the ruthlessness of time, and we use them fearlessly on the heritage of the past, less fearlessly when we are dealing with our contemporaries. We are privileged to say "This is poetry" and "That is not," and to give our reasons for thinking so. We are likely to be wrong in that the heresies of one generation are the commonplaces of the next, but we are likely to be right in so far as our critical judgments are only at-

tempts to particularise the fundamental qualities of all poetry. That is, if we say *a priori* that because a certain poem lacks the form, or the idiom which has in the past accompanied great poetry, the certain poem is not great poetry, we are applying objective standards, which are never binding. But if we say that the work under consideration is second-rate because it does not rouse any of the feeling we associate with and want from great poetry, we may be proving our own lack of pliability, or our own spiritual poverty, but one thing is certain: that we are at least giving an honest judgment, and an intelligent one in that we do not confuse the essential element of emotion, which is for all time, with the secondary intellectual quality which is variable. The quest of the soul for beauty is constant; forms and idioms are manifold, and each generation begets them in profusion.

I do not mean by this that the forms and idioms of poetry are not vastly important, nor do I mean that criticism is a waste of time. Nothing is a waste of time which is productive of enduring pleasure, and I am testifying with every word I write that discussion and argument about poetry is pleasant. That it is useful, too, to the people who consider learning useful, is obvious, for in trying to decide why we like what we instinctively like, we learn prodigiously, not only about the subject under discussion, but about ourselves and those who agree or disagree with us.

So having delivered in advance my apologia, I come to a twofold task of definition: first, the statement of what, for the purposes of this book, will be classified as poetry; and second, the general standard which will enable me to be understood when I state that within the accepted limits certain things are real poetry and certain others are not.

I believe that poetry is the highest possible expression of the individual soul in its attempt to live fully, intensely and with integrity in a perplexing world; that ideally it is an effort to phrase mysteries which have never yet been phrased

so exactly that our reason may embrace them, and that any effort to do this, however inadequate, is closer to real poetry than any facile success with superficial subjects, however clever or momentarily beguiling. And since I believe this it is obvious that I should be able to recognise as great poetry only such words as are fused by the imagination into a concentrated and organic whole, to express some thought or feeling about life, and as have in them a quality which is indefinable but which is usually called ecstasy or passion. A great poem must awaken something in the reader; it must enlighten some aspect of thought, or enrich some moment of living, or immortalise some mood, and bring to each of these a significance lent it by intensity of feeling on the part of the poet. All of which is another way of saying that great poetry is universal in its application, and permanent in its values; that whatever its trappings, its secondary though highly important variations of form, whatever its integral dependence on the language without which it would cease to be anything except material for poetry, it nevertheless has its ultimate roots in problems which have faced every thoughtful person who ever lived.

For to the poet, as to all contemplative men, "every land is home . . . and the whole world is an exile." He seeks and momentarily finds, I believe, "mortal blisses," but his most vital preoccupation is with the "shapes that haunt Thought's Wilderness":

He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be—
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living Man,
Nurslings of Immortality.

PART TWO

English Poetry and English History

Chapter One

CONSECRATION OF VALOUR

I

About the year 400 A.D., when the Roman legions were withdrawn from Britain, there began the long struggle of that island against North Sea invaders, the always unsuccessful struggle which in the Fifth Century, and in the Ninth, and again in the Eleventh, saw the triumph of the Germanic sea-rover. The first, or so-called Anglo-Saxon, invaders, destroyed the civilisation which Rome had brought, drove Christianity across the marshes of Wales, killed a considerable proportion of the native Celts, and then settled to the task of clearing the forest and establishing a rudiment of government and order. During the next two hundred years, almost nothing is known about events in England; but the life of those days probably resembled the worst of Eighteenth Century American frontier conditions aggravated by the lust for butchery and reprisal of Scotch border warfare. At any rate, we know that the Anglo-Saxons abandoned the sea, and turned to land fighting and to agriculture.

Then, after the darkness from 400 to 600, there followed two centuries of growing prosperity and light, terminating for most of England in another plague of sea-wandering pirates, another period of destruction, another slow recovery. From the time of the re-introduction of Christianity, about 600, until the Viking inroads after 800, England was acquiring a notable civilisation. Christianity spread fast and easily, for there was no very active religion to oppose it, and with Christianity came learning and organisation and at least a tendency toward cohesion. Monastic life developed, and

learned foreigners such as Theodore of Tarsus were sent to England by the Pope. During the last years of the Seventh and the first years of the Eighth centuries, English churchmen like Alcuin and Bede became the leading scholars of Europe. But outside of the Church, progress was not fast. Political history remained a matter of raids and meaningless wars between the petty kingdoms that divided England, or between these new Germanic states and the Celts to the west of them, in Cornwall, Wales, Strathclyde. It was this political futility that left the new Anglo-Saxon civilisation open to devastation by the pirates when in the Ninth Century the North Sea peoples were astir again, carrying warfare and plunder from Greenland to the Dardanelles. These amazing Vikings were of the same race as the Anglo-Saxons, and had, in the year 800, the same religion and the same civilisation that the latter had represented at the time of their invasion of Celtic Britain, four hundred years before. But the Anglo-Saxons had grown soft in the meantime, as compared with their seafaring cousins, and the Vikings harried them at will, until half England was overrun. It was not until the Danes—as the peoples of this second invasion came to be called—were at the Thames River, that the Saxons under King Alfred made a successful stand. There followed the Treaty of Wedmore (878) and England was divided in two parts—the Danelaw to the north and east, and Wessex to the south. Within the Danelaw, the civilisation which had flourished so surprisingly since 600 was swept away; Christianity went with it, and the land returned to the life it had known after the departure of the Romans.

Before long, however, the marauding Norsemen settled down, becoming farmers and landlubbers just as the Anglo-Saxons had previously done; so in the next century the son and grandson of King Alfred conquered the Danelaw, creating for the first time an united England (about 975). But a generation later this new kingdom fell before a third wave

of Norsemen, under King Swegn of Denmark and his son Cnut. This time, however, there was no devastation and no return to barbarism. The Viking age was over; the Scandinavians themselves had been Christianised; Cnut was no robber chieftain, but the powerful ruler of a northern empire which included Denmark, Norway, England, and the Western Islands. Had he lived, he could probably have given his new state solidity and permanence. In that case the history of England would have remained part of the history of Scandinavia, and the whole story of Europe would have been different. But Cnut died young; his sons were worthless; England broke loose from the northern empire and at once became the prey of the latinised Normans from France. Her purely Germanic days were over, and the Middle Ages had begun.

2

It is with these "purely Germanic days" ¹ that I wish to deal in the present chapter. What sort of people were the Anglo-Saxons, and the Vikings after them? What did they believe and hope and fear? What view of life, if any, formed the common background for this Teutonic world? What civilisation did it seem to be developing, before it was influenced by foreign notions from the Mediterranean? It is possible to answer these questions with some exactness, for the ancient Norsemen left behind them an extensive literature.

Most of the poetry of these peoples would be considered poor and uninteresting, if judged absolutely, or in comparison with first-rate poetry. And it is important to bear in mind that no amount of historical or cultural interest in a literature can add in the least to its poetic, spiritual qualities. Such

¹ This phrase is misleading. It is clear that there must have been a mixture of Celtic blood in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and hence, later, in the Danelaw. Certainly the original population of Britain can not have been entirely slaughtered or driven out. But as to how much Celtic blood was mingled with the Germanic, historians have never been in agreement, and there is no reason to suppose they ever will be.

qualities must be judged according to the standard set by what we feel to be best; and by any such standard there is nothing in ancient Germanic literature, outside of the Icelandic, which is better than a poor second-rate. Any one who forgets this is misled by what Arnold called the historical fallacy—the fallacy which to the literary scholar is as an hiding place from the wind and a covert from the tempest.

And yet the primitive Germanic races were great and gifted people, and they seem to have been on their way to establishing a worth-while civilisation of their own, before they were blocked off and turned into the general current of south-European affairs. So although their literature—for reasons I shall discuss below—did not become great, it can nevertheless provide stimulation to the mind and spirit, if studied in the light of history, and by a person interested in the developing story of man.

In attempting to answer the questions I asked above as to the ancient Teutons, I shall draw material from the various primitive Germanic literatures, and not merely from that which chanced to be written down in England. This is legitimate, because the whole of that world which was known to the Roman historians as *Germania* had in fact a common view of life, a common cultural background, and to a great extent a common stock of tales. Just as Hellas, in the old days, did not mean the tip end of the Balkan peninsula, but rather the entire Ægean world—so that it made no difference whereabouts in that world a man lived, or what dialect he spoke, he would be familiar with the tales in Homer—so from the Fifth to the Tenth centuries, along the shores of the Baltic and the North seas and up the east bank of the Rhine, the inhabitants of *Germania* knew one another's stories and were always eager to hear them retold. For example, *Beowulf*, the English poem composed for recitation in English halls, deals with men and events of Denmark and Sweden, and includes incidentally an account of an episode from the life of Sigmund,

whose story is the basis of the Icelandic *Volsungasaga* and of the High German *Nibelungenlied*.

Another thing to be remembered in discussing a primitive literature is that for a comparison of one work with another actual chronology makes no difference at all; cultural development is the only standard of contemporaneousness. The Anglo-Saxons of the Fifth Century and the Danes of the Ninth are coevals from this point of view, because they are similar people, with similar culture and religion, and at the same stage of development. Conversely, in the year 1000 the Normans in France and their cousins in Norway and Iceland are not, in this sense, contemporaries; they represent different stages of cultural development.

The way of life which is shown in the earliest, pre-Christian literature of Germania is commonly called the heroic life, a stage through which all peoples appear to pass. What are the characteristics of such a life? In the first place, there will be enough social organisation, enough feeling of community between the different groups in a district, for common traditions and interests to grow up, but not enough for the creation of anything like a modern state, to which even the strongest man's ambitions and desires must be subordinate. Local, separatist interests are always dominant in an heroic age, and not even the shadowy central power of a feudal government exists. Secondly, the small and jealous groups which make up an heroic society will be organised aristocratically. The warrior-chieftains will be subject to no interference from the common people below them, any more than from a central government above them. But on the other hand, the chieftain will rule because of his own worth, and not merely through the accident of birth. He must be better than the men about him at the common tasks which they all perform—fighting, ploughing, sailing, cattle-dealing, etc.—for in an heroic age there is little division of labour. The leader controls his own small group because he has won the personal allegiance of his

followers, and he keeps that allegiance by doing best the things which they all must do. It is here that the greatest distinction between an heroic and a feudal age appears. The feudal lord is expected to be a specialist in fighting, and he must not demean himself by engaging in any other form of labour. Prestige, in the feudal world, is no longer a simple matter of ability, but is determined in part by the type of labour performed. The position of an incompetent knight-at-arms, in the Thirteenth Century, was superior to that of a first-rate farmer or shoemaker—though it must be admitted that if the knight was really incompetent his chances of surviving were slim.

The characteristics of heroic life which I have mentioned—the petty state; the absence of division of labour; the concern with simple things like fighting, sailing, ploughing, herding; the warrior-ruler whose individualism is tempered only by the necessity of keeping the respect of his retainers—all these things are as true of the heroic age in Greece as in Germania. Homer wrote about a people who had just abandoned the nomadic way of life, and who had not yet established any strong government. This is precisely the position of the Germanic tribes during their heroic period. And not only are the general social institutions of the two worlds similar, but the resemblance extends to details. The life in the chieftain's hall which is pictured in *Beowulf* is just the life Odysseus encounters at the court of the Phæacians. The two heroes are received in the same way and entertained after the same fashion. As Mr. Ker says, "It is impossible to mistake the likeness between the Greek and the Northern conceptions of a dignified and a reasonable way of life. The magnificence of the Homeric great man is like the magnificence of the Northern lord." A number of such similarities may be found. The end of the *Iliad* tells of the building of a prehistoric barrow, and the end of *Beowulf* tells of the same. The battle descrip-

tions in the English "Battle of Maldon"¹ and in the *Iliad* are almost interchangeable—always excepting the quality of the poetry. In both, the fighting is a succession of single combats which are described blow by blow, and in both we are given the speeches and the thoughts of the fighters. Again, what has been described as "the Northern principle of resistance to all odds, and defiance of ruin" was expressed by Achilles some fourteen hundred years before the first traces of Germanic literature:

"Well I know that I am destined to die here, far from my father and mother. Howbeit, I will not refrain until I give the Trojans surfeit of war."²

The first thing to recall, then, in seeking to understand the ancient Norsemen, is this general heroic background, and any reader familiar with Homer will be able to fill in the details for himself. The next question of importance would be, what was the Norsemen's religion? Carlyle has described it as a "rude but earnest, sternly impressive Consecration of Valour," and that phrase is a good summary of their faith. They believed in an inflexible Fate to which every one should submit without complaining, and they believed that "the one thing

¹ A tenth century poem, but one which preserves the heroic manner in every detail.

² The analogy between Greek and Germanic epic has been worked out in detail by Mr. W. P. Ker, and most of the illustrations I have given are taken from his book, *Epic and Romance*.

Some well esteemed scholars have explained these similarities by assuming that the poet who composed *Beowulf* was familiar with the *Odyssey*, and also with the *Æneid*. It is true that during the generation of Theodore of Tarsus—Archbishop of Canterbury from 669 to 690—and the following generation of Bede—who died in 735—there were men in England with a finer Latin and Greek scholarship than would be known again for some eight hundred years. And the author of *Beowulf* may have been a contemporary of Bede. Of course, if *Beowulf* was partly modelled on the *Odyssey*, the likenesses between the two poems are no proof of corresponding likenesses between the cultures. But the theory that *Beowulf* was directly influenced by Greek or Latin models seems to me extremely far-fetched. This is a literary judgment, and the modern scholar would laugh at it as unscientific. Yet "scientific scholarship," in the *Beowulf* field, has produced such masterpieces as the theory that Beowulf is Christ, and the still more unexpected theory that Beowulf is Hamlet.

needful for a man was to be brave." Between the Norse hero and his gods there was true fellowship; both were subject to changeless destiny, and both would go down together, fighting side by side against the powers of chaos, in the twilight of the known world. It is easy to see why their lives were stern and violent, so guided—and why there is a ground-tone of lament throughout their literature.

Aside from these simple and fundamental beliefs—fatalism, the necessity for bravery—and aside from a few social virtues, such as loyalty to the unwritten bond between the local chieftain and his retainers, there seems to have been very little to which these Norsemen were committed. They had priests, apparently; but it is hard to determine what the priests did, or how seriously they were taken. They had a mythology. But such a poem as the Icelandic *Lokasenna*—in which the gods are humorously chided for their conduct—suggests that the Norsemen took their mythology even more lightly than the Greeks took theirs. So judging by literary evidence, and by the ease with which Christianity spread,¹ the heroic chieftain of Germania seems to have been as little impeded by codes or dogma as any one in human history. In this, too, he resembled the Homeric Greek. Mr. Gilbert Murray has drawn the parallel as follows, "The tribe is broken up; instead comes the comitatus of casual men who attach themselves to a particular chief, as Phœnix or Patroclus to Achilles. Religion is broken up, being by origin local. Hence there is almost no religion in the *Iliad* or the *Nibelungenlied*. Almost

¹ In this connection, compare the story told by Bede of the conversion to Christianity of King Edwin of Northumbria. Edwin called his retainers to a meeting and asked them what they thought of the new religion. One of them rose and said that the only thing they knew for sure about the life of man was that it resembled the swift flight of a sparrow through a house where men feasted in winter. The sparrow flew in out of the tempest, and for a moment he was warm and well, until he vanished into the tempest again. If these Christians, the retainer concluded, knew anything about that world of storm and darkness outside the brightly-lighted hall, it would be well to listen to them. . . . This was a wise speech, certainly; but it would never have been made to men who were already possessed of a dogmatic faith.

no magic. No family life. Tremendous booty, and *la carrière ouverte aux talents* with a vengeance."

Such, then, was the view of life, and such the social organisation, of the peoples who invaded Britain after the Roman troops withdrew, and of those who harried the island a second time shortly after the year 800. By occupation these men were traders, pirates, and farmers, so long as they remained in their continental homes. This is a somewhat unusual combination of trades, but in the Icelandic sagas we see how it was effected. A man would plant his grain, and then go sea-faring, returning in time to harvest his crops. While on the sea, he would trade, if that proved convenient and practical; or he would plunder settlements along the coast, if for the moment that seemed to offer larger and easier rewards. Sometimes a man would specialise in trading and piracy during his youth; then later, about the time he married, he would settle down to agriculture with only occasional voyages to lift the monotony. . . . This was a type of life which produced a violence of temperament which can not be understood by any one who has not read the sagas. The will of the individual was the only power such men would recognise, and nothing but death could turn them from their purpose. When two people of this type came into conflict, one of them had to be destroyed. Any trifle provoked a battle of giants, which often continued beyond the generation which began it. As Mr. Ker says, " 'Greatly to find quarrel in a straw' is the rule of their conduct. . . . Anything, almost, is enough to set the play going." The reader of the sagas comes to feel that these Norsemen were not only rash, they were carefully, deliberately violent, destroying all opposition until they met something or some one stronger than themselves, at which point they perished. For example, in the *Gunnlaug Saga* the hero and Raven meet, after years of enmity, on a deserted shore in Norway. Gunnlaug has a companion with him, and Raven

has two; but these men have nothing at all to do with the quarrel between the chief characters. However:

When they met, Gunnlaug said, "Now it is well that we have found one another."

Raven answered that he found no fault with this. "But now there is the choice, whichever you will," he said, "that all of us fight, or just we two, so that the two sides may be of equal strength."

Gunnlaug said he would be well pleased whichever was done. Then Grim and Olaf, the kinsmen of Raven, *said they would not care to stand by while the others fought*. And Thorkel the Black, Gunnlaug's relative, said the same."—*Gunnlaug Saga*, chap. x.

So because Grim and Olaf "would not care to stand by while the others fought," they all entered in—and the upshot was that the five of them were killed. . . .

When Norsemen such as these settled in England, however, the opportunities for agriculture were so much better than anything they had known among the fiords of Norway or the sand-flats of the Danish coast, that they abandoned their seafaring lives and became prosaic farmers. This happened about 600, after the first wave of invaders had settled down; and it happened again two and a half centuries later. An immediate result of settled life was the tendency for the small warrior-band to merge itself in larger units and for little kingdoms to grow up. Such was the state of affairs in England about 700, when the first Old English poetry¹ was composed. However, the life pictured in these earliest English poems is the old heroic life which was dying out, rather than the new transitional stage between an heroic society and a feudal. *Beowulf*, the only long poem which has come down from old English days, was composed in the north of England somewhere around the year 700, after Christianity had been fairly generally adopted and after the kingdom of Northumbria had grown up. Yet *Beowulf* is primarily a pagan poem,²

¹ The first, that is, which has come down to us.

² This is a controversial point. Some scholars believe that the occasional Christian references were inserted after the poem was written, perhaps by the

and it pictures the old heroic life in Denmark and Sweden before the Anglo-Saxons began raiding Britain. This would naturally be expected of an epic poem; for always in the evolution of any people there comes first the period of heroic action, and then a quieter, more tranquil age, in which the great stories from the heroic period are told over and over until they shape themselves into true epics. This is what happened in Greece, where the Homeric poems in their final form are probably at least two hundred years later than the period of heroic action; it is what happened in Germania; it is what happened among the French, where the first Charlemagne epics which have survived date from after the year 1000.

This point about the two periods required for the production of an heroic literature—a period of action which contributes the material, and a period of reminiscence and artistic creation, in which that material slowly takes form and evolves as epic poetry—this point is very important for any one who would understand the nature and the limitations of the early Germanic literatures.¹ It suggests the answer to the first

south-of-England monk who made the only copy of *Beowulf* which we possess. Other scholars think that these Christian references, plus the mildness and courtesy and consideration of the hero in his dealing with men—for *Beowulf* is ferocious only against monsters—prove that the author was himself a Christian. Either view seems to me tenable; and in either case I should continue to assert that "*Beowulf* is primarily a pagan poem." For everything which is of genuine and lasting interest in the poem is a product of old Germanic heathendom: the picture of the heroic social life, in the feasting at King Hrothgar's mead-hall; the picture of the heroic virtues, in the character of *Beowulf* himself (for even if he has been softened and toned down by Christianity, it is not because of the softening that we honour him, but because of the ancient hardness beneath); the glimpses of the Vikings' feeling about the sea, in the voyage of *Beowulf* from his own home to Heorot; the pagan and impressive burial ceremony with which the poem ends. It is because of elements such as these that *Beowulf* deserves attention; and even if some one proved that the author himself thought that the poem was about Christ, a sensible reader would still know that it was about Germania.

¹ On a small scale, the same two periods are required by an individual poet. He must have his spirit stirred by events in the outer world, and he must have a period of germination, in which the really vital part of composition is carried on somewhere in his unconscious. This is the reason for Wordsworth's dictum about "emotion recollected in tranquillity." A poet who tries to write immediately on receiving his stimulus, without a preparatory period of brooding and transmutation, will usually produce work as trivial as the official verses of a poet laureate.

question that comes to mind on reading *Beowulf*, or the *Nibelungenlied*, or any of the fragments of lost Germanic epics—the question as to why these poems are so inadequate. Here is splendid material for work of an Homeric quality; here are people obviously well endowed with imagination; yet the Teutonic epic is limited on every side, knowing only a few moods, a few emotions, and presenting these with little poetic power. The Greek epic, on the other hand, with similar material, has no such limitations. The essential theme of the two literatures is the same; but the northern poets repeated it over and over again, with only the most obvious changes, whereas Homer varied it skilfully and mingled it with many foreign themes, relieving it of monotony and presenting it with the richness of spiritual suggestion that has made his poems permanently valuable. What is the explanation of this difference? I think it certain—and I shall give my reasons for this certainty later—that the Germanic races were not lacking in high poetic power or in literary ability; so the answer must lie elsewhere. A comparison of the development of the two civilisations will suggest an answer.

When the long-haired Achæans gave up their nomadic life and settled in the Peloponnesus, grouping themselves into the little village kingdoms which we have seen to be characteristic of an heroic age, they were favoured with several centuries of unhampered life—of life unhampered by alien invasions or the influence of alien thought, that is. They had destroyed the Mycenæan culture which preceded them, and though the remnants of this more complicated civilisation may have stimulated their imaginations, it certainly did not force itself upon them, or in any way deflect them from their normal course of development. So their epic literature was the product of a society which was growing gradually away from its heroic age, advancing in civilisation and culture but still retaining many of the institutions from the earlier period. The heroic age was far enough in the past to be slightly idealised; but its cus-

toms had not been altered materially, its ideals had not been superseded, while at the same time there had been an advance in culture which made possible the presentation of past days bathed in the colours of the spirit, and an advance in thought and experience which made possible the introduction of new romantic elements, elements which were kept properly subordinate to the dominant heroic mood, but which helped to alleviate the plainness and literal truth which become tiresome in a very long poem.

Compare this with the hampered unhealthy conditions among which the Teutonic epic developed. Immediately after the close of the period of heroic action (about the year 600 for the Anglo-Saxons, and 1000 for the Norwegians and Icelanders) the Germanic world was brought into contact with a foreign and subverting civilisation. It could not develop its own ideals in peace, but was faced by an astonishingly subtle creed which must have bewildered at the same time that it fascinated the simple forthright mind. The Greek Fathers of the Church, who were so influential in establishing its dogmas, were as tortuously and minutely acute as any thinkers who have ever lived. And the creed which had been elaborated by such minds was then presented to these northern pagans who were as unsophisticated as their own wooden architecture. With that event, all chance of the Teutons developing a great heroic literature was gone. Christianity exercised a steady influence, and though it was some centuries before the Northern spirit had been successfully merged with the Mediterranean, still it never had a chance to fulfil its native promise. All that we find expressed in the Nordic epics are those qualities which were fully developed by the close of the period of heroic action—strength, courage, loyalty, steadfastness. These are the ground-tones of any heroic literature, but they are almost the only tones of the Teutonic. After the period of wandering and the period of heroic deeds, the Teutons should have had a century or two to think it all

over, to build up and regulate their tradition, to develop their art forms, and to evolve some articulated opinions as to the meaning of life and the nature of man. Then perhaps they might have given us a northern *Odyssey*; for they had imagination and sensibility and the gift of vision, as is proved in Icelandic literature, where we find the Germanic spirit expressing itself comparatively unhampered.

The Icelanders were not affected by Christianity until the year 1000, and the sagas would seem to prove that it was at least another century before the new religion seriously interfered with their native spirit. Their lonely, forbidding island was colonised between 875 and 900. At that time King Alfred was ruling over Wessex, beating back the Danes who had destroyed Christianity and art in northern England; so at that time the Anglo-Saxons were two centuries or more from their own heroic age. The spirit of Germania had ceased to satisfy them and they had not yet properly absorbed the new and subtler spirit from the south; so aside from the career of Alfred himself this is the dreariest period in English literature and history. Meanwhile, upon the edge of the Arctic Circle, the men who had left Norway for Iceland were carrying the native traditions of Germania to the finest development they were destined to know. Before any one concludes that these traditions were meagre and unworthy things, he should learn Icelandic and study the literary productions of that island between the years 900 and 1100.

From the beginning, these Icelandic settlers represented Germania at its most characteristic, for they had left Norway in order to escape from Harold Fairhair, who was conquering all the petty chieftains in the land and creating a strong state. The Norwegian lords refused to be the vassals of any king; they turned their backs on Europe and on the future—for it was by means of such centralisation that progress was to come—taking themselves to that bitter inaccessible land where at least they might continue to live as seemed to them

proper. There, for more than two hundred years, they maintained the old traditions of Germania, and there they found time to grow self-conscious and articulate about their life, and to express it in an heroic literature. Without denying that the southern and Christian civilisation was a superior thing, having in it the seeds of a longer and a finer growth, one can be glad that this other experiment was carried on somewhere, and that the records of it have been preserved.

For reasons which are beside my present point, the Icelanders wrote their great tales in prose. But it is a prose which has epic quality. The saga characters are dramatically presented; they are never subordinated to plot or theme. And the sagas have Homeric universality of mood; they can be tragic, comic, even romantic, without losing their backbone of the heroic. Steadily they present life in three dimensions; they do not fall to the flat sameness of medieval romance. All these attainments the sagas have in common with Homer; and they are picturing, as I have shown before, an Homeric way of life. But the sagas are prose, and in spite of their greatness they show the spiritual inferiority of that medium, if they are read with the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* in mind. Clear, simple, rational, beautifully explicit—this is a prose the like of which was not seen again in a Germanic language for many centuries. It is a dry and lucid prose that would have satisfied Julius Cæsar. And as a vehicle for epic literature, though sadly inferior to Homeric poetry, it compares favourably with the sort of verse found in *Beowulf*. For *Beowulf* has little to recommend it except the heroic spirit, which it shares with all true epics, and even this spirit is only present by flashes. The main story of *Beowulf* is a tale of monsters and dragons, and the poem deserves to be called an epic only because the heroic way of life is pictured, in spite of the plot, and because it strives to be a drama of character and not a tale of adventure. But the poem has neither sustained beauty, nor spiritual insight, nor even a high degree of technical

adroitness in the handling of the verse.¹ And Anglo-Saxon verse at its best is not very fine. The metre is always the same—a line of irregular length, with four main stresses, with a pause somewhere near the middle, and with alliteration binding the two halves of the line together:

Bēowulf mæpelode, bearn Ecgbēowes:
 “Hwaet! þū worn fela, wine min Unferð,
 bēore druŋcen ymb Brecaŋ sprāēce.”

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow:
 “What a lot of stuff, my friend, have you stated,
 After drinking beer, in regard to Breca.”

With a little practice, any one could learn to talk along indefinitely in such a metre. It was devised by men whose living depended on their ability to compose many verses, almost upon demand, in celebration of the deeds of their lords. It was a metre well adapted to vigorous narrative; but subtler effects were obtained from it with difficulty. The process of composition, for the hurried Anglo-Saxon poet, was further simplified by a device known as the *kenning*. A kenning is a circumlocutory phrase used either instead of the proper name for an object—in which case it is a species of riddle for the reader to solve—or else in addition to the proper name, in which case it is mere padding. For example, after the mention of a lord's name, the next half line will usually consist of some such conventional phrase as *sige-rōf kyning*, the victorious king. Or else, when the poet wants to refer to the sea, he will call it “the whale's path,” or “the swan's road,” while a ship will be some such thing as a “wave-sailer.” Nothing could be less poetic than this device. A true poetic metaphor may be roundabout; but its excuse is that it conveys an

¹ These strictures, of course, are the result of judging *Beowulf* absolutely, in comparison with the best, rather than historically, i.e., in the light of what might, under the circumstances, have been expected.

impression which could not otherwise be conveyed. When Shelley calls the west wind "thou breath of Autumn's being," when Keats refers to autumn as "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," something of the inner quality of the object described is being suggested to the reader, something which could never be put into prose. But when the poet of *Beowulf* calls the North Sea "the swan's road," nothing at all is gained. In fact something has been lost, because an elaborate expression has been substituted for a simple one, and in the use of language there is bound to be a tawdry effect from un-called-for elaboration. These kennings may be compared to the Eighteenth Century genteel paraphrases. When poets wrote of "ocean's scaly breed," when they meant fish, or of "the grunting, bristly kind" when they meant pigs, they were unconsciously reviving the Old English kenning.

How far this trick of the kenning *could* be developed was shown in the skaldic poetry of Iceland. The skalds were the court poets, whose business it was to write endless lengths of laudatory verses for one uninspiring chieftain after another, and who had to recount in detail the most prosaic and matter-of-fact events, such as marches, the locations of battles, the number of troops engaged, the names of the leaders, etc. Obviously, there was no hope of giving these productions poetic merit; but still they had to be distinguished in some fashion. So elaborate verse forms were evolved, which only a skilful craftsman could handle, and then the kenning was employed in the most fantastically roundabout and allusive fashion, so that none but a person thoroughly familiar with the conventions, and with a quick wit for the solving of riddles, would have any idea what the poem was about. For example, in the *Gunnlaug Saga* the hero composes a stanza expressing his contempt for his rival in love, Raven, who has been objecting to Gunnlaug's method of belittling him in public. Raven, says Gunnlaug, who is afraid of raillery, will never win the girl

Helga, because Gunnlaug himself has been a playmate of Helga since the days when they were both young. That is all the stanza *means*; but a literal translation is as follows:

He who is wary of scoff, the Handler of the Fire of the storm of Odin [*storm of Odin* means battle; *the fire of battle* means sword; *the handler of the sword* means man, i.e., Raven] will not succeed in winning for himself Jord of the Gown, clad in linen [*Jord* is a goddess; *the goddess of the gown* means woman; *the woman in linen* means Helga], because when I was younger I played with different promontories of the fire of the forearm [*the fire of the forearm* means gold; *the promontories of gold* means the fingers] of the land of the ground of the fish of the Heath [*fish of the Heath* means dragon; *ground of the dragon* means gold; *land of the gold* means woman, or Helga]!¹

When poetic conventions have reached such a point that a man calls his beloved "the land of the ground of the fish of the heath," something would seem to have gone wrong. Of course the Eddic poetry is not afflicted with such nonsense; this is found in such exaggerated forms only in the skaldic court-poetry.

So much, then, for pagan, heroic literature in England. We have seen why it did not develop into anything more notable, and we have discussed what there is of profit and interest which a study of this literature can yield. Before passing on to the Christian poetry of Anglo-Saxon days, I wish to repeat once more that the trouble with the Germanic epic is that the Germanic peoples did not have time enough, after their period of action, to think things over, to brood upon them, to "recollect them in tranquillity," and thus to transmute them into material for true poetry. Before they had opportunity to assimilate their epic tradition, it was taken from them, and they faced the task of assimilating something entirely new. With the disappearance of this epic tradition, there ceases to be any such thing as Germania, and we come

¹ In translating and interpreting these kennings, I have followed the suggestions of Dr. Mogk, the most recent editor of the *Gunnlaug Saga*; but of course there is no way of proving that these interpretations are correct.

to the time when the literature of England must be studied by itself, and not as part of the literature of a Teutonic world.

3

The earliest Christian poet of England whose work has been preserved, and has any merit, is Cynewulf, who wrote about a hundred years after the probable date of *Beowulf*, and who was also a north-of-England man. He lived just before the second Germanic invasion of England, and he was both the first English poet whose name and whose writings have come down to us, and the last poet, of whom we have record, to do any extensive and original work in English for over four hundred years. Between the Danish destruction of Northumbria, somewhere around 825, and the generation of Simon de Montfort and the Baron's Wars (around 1258), there has been preserved no poetry in English except a few battle descriptions in the Tenth Century and some paraphrases of part of the Old Testament. And it was another hundred years after 1258 before any enduringly important English verse was written. The obvious explanation of this, for post-Norman England, is that the educated and articulate classes were all speaking and writing French or Latin.¹ But this explanation will not do for pre-Norman days, and if the barrenness of the years between 825 and 1066—a period slightly longer than that which has elapsed since the death of Dryden—is compared with the apparent fecundity of the old pagan days, it will be seen how long it took for the Germanic spirit to assimilate its new fare. When the assimilation was finally completed, the result was a splendid thing; but in the meantime Cynewulf and his school—for there seems to have been a group of writers on Christian themes living in the north of England in Cynewulf's day—represent the only serious attempt at poetic expression in English.

¹ There was, of course, an interesting French literature in England in the Thirteenth Century.

If judged by strict poetic standards, this Cynewulfian verse can not be esteemed very highly; but again the historical approach adds interest, though not literary value, to the subject. For it is most decidedly interesting to watch this Anglian churchman, who in youth may himself have been a pagan, struggling to give poetic expression to his new and much-prized faith. Cynewulf's emotional response to the new faith and the new way of dealing with life was genuine and deep, but emotional response is at best only part of the raw material of a poem. Cynewulf makes us feel that he was very earnest, and that Christianity meant a great deal to him, that it moved him in the profoundest part of his being and gave his life a validity that it would not otherwise have known. All this is interesting and valuable testimony, but it is not poetry. Cynewulf has been stirred to the depths, and yet he does not stir his readers in the same way, because the new impulses have not had time to become a part of the unknown, instinctive side of his nature and so can not be translated into the material for dreams. To talk of racial instincts or inheritances is to trespass on dangerous and unexplored ground; but it seems to me very certain that such a momentous thing as the spirit of a religion can not find poetic expression except among a people whose heritage it has been during a long time. The Hebrews had lived many hundred years in Palestine before the first of the Old Testament poems was written; Dante came at the end, and not at the beginning, of the Middle Ages.

Such, at any rate, is my explanation of the poetic sterility of Anglo-Saxon England: the old heroic literature was thwarted by contact with the new and more vital Christianity, and Christianity involved too fundamental a change to become quickly available for important poetry. Whether or not this explanation is accepted, the one explanation that there is no warrant for accepting is that these old English were half-civilised people, and hence lacking in poetic capacity.

So-called half-civilised people produced Isaiah and Ecclesiastes and the Homeric epics—which suggests that there is something wrong with our common conception of civilisation. The question of poetic capacity is not dependent upon whether people live in large or little social units, or upon whether they live an agricultural or an industrial life; it is dependent upon spiritual worth and power. And it is easily shown that the old Norsemen had the latter quality in abundance. I have already referred to the sagas of Iceland as proof that, unhampered, the Teutonic people could develop a splendid heroic literature. But the sagas are prose, and do not prove poetic power. However, the Elder Edda—also an Icelandic work—contains poetry of high value. Most of the Eddic lays are semi-dramatic lyrics, and they contain just the quality that *Beowulf* and *Cynewulf* lack. Such a work as the *Voluspo* is an example of prophetic or cosmic poetry beautifully achieved. There is one passage of a little over a hundred lines, in which the wise-woman is answering Odin's questions as to the ultimate fate of the Gods, and in this brief space there is condensed the grandeur and the stern courage of the northern view of life. For in the story of the *Götterdämmerung* there lies the meaning of Teutonic paganism; and in the Tenth Century, a few years before that paganism was forever extinguished, the tale was given superb form. There is no question of historical fallacy here. Any one who will read it in the original, and who will acquaint himself with the people and events alluded to—so that what was an added richness to the Norsemen will not be merely an interruption to him—will find in the *Voluspo* a great poem, and will not be inclined to believe that the Germanic peoples lacked capacity in this line.

In concluding my discussion of Old English poetry, I should like to point out that the Anglo-Saxons aimed high. Both their pagan and their Christian works were attempts at the

poetry of prophecy.¹ And although they bungled the high thing, they merit consideration from the modern world, which does not bungle prophetic poetry simply because it does not try it. We are taking refuge in virtuosity, or in desultory and detached flashes of vision, from a world which has bewildered and disorganised us. It is probably not our fault that we can find no order in life; but it is certainly our fault that we do not try. A small thing done neatly and well makes a better showing than a great thing botched; but there is no reason to suppose that the maker of the first has progressed spiritually beyond the maker of the second.

¹ This, of course, is not true of the battle descriptions, such as "Maldon," or of brief lyrics like "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer."

Chapter Two

THE SEA OF FAITH

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

I

There was little poetry in England when William took the throne, and as was suggested in the preceding chapter, this is not strange. The conglomerate mixture of Britons, Celts, Angles, Saxons, and Vikings, who a few centuries earlier had merged their differences to the extent of becoming a fairly unified people—the symbol of which unification was the Anglo-Saxon speech—were in the Eleventh Century just beginning to emerge from a still more significant and difficult melting-process. They were just beginning to speak a common language of the spirit, having absorbed the intricate synthesis of Christianity. Paganism in its local forms had given way to an articulate ideal, to the great romantic dream of Christianity; and although paganism persisted in that it had already coloured and twisted many little strands in the pattern the Church was weaving, it nevertheless altered its ends and took on the idiom of the Church. The people were at the beginning of the Eleventh Century becoming really at home in the Catholic faith, so that beyond the shadow of its dominion they saw only terror and darkness. Their minds worked comfortably within its limits, and as those limits were almost as wide as the human imagination, the Christian ideal was rapidly making them over in its own likeness. We are still, even in the sceptical Twentieth Century, made largely in the image of this faith. It is doubtful if we have any

lasting ideals, any native impulses of the spirit, which are not ultimately rooted in the Roman Catholicism which was for sixteen hundred years identical with Christianity, and which built our Western civilisation, laid all its foundations, and directed its thought.

The Cluniac reform first directed the Christian ideal toward the great social and political mission of a Papal kingdom. So long as the Papacy was a creative ideal, it was a stupendous channel for good. Men poured their spiritual energy into the dream of an united Christendom, and while they were absorbed in making the Church great, the Church was reciprocally making them great. Later, when the ideal was enough achieved so that the political elements began to preponderate, much of this spiritual fervour was diverted to secular affairs. But until 1100 men's creative efforts were concentrated in one of the most difficult, and one of the most successful efforts at vast assimilation which has ever been recorded. England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, the North countries—these sparsely-peopled tracts of land where five hundred years before savages had bowed to even more savage deities—all these countries were passionately absorbed in the half-conscious process of fusing into organic unity a mass of Christian doctrine and patristic theology, and of reconciling it all with their individual heritages. Twice five hundred years would not be too long for so complex a process as this, but by the year 1066 the work was largely accomplished. When William the Conqueror bridged the channel, and stood virtually with one foot in Normandy and one foot on the shores of what might have been an isolated England, he made possible the Angevin dominions; which, as a territorial ambition though not as a political reality, were to last until the end of the Fourteenth Century.

Such a union as this could never have been effected had the

Church not been the true nation, with England and France as provinces.

It is true, however, that in the essentials of social development the two countries were not unlike. In both, as in every other Christianised country formerly occupied by the Romans, the old heroic order had given way to feudalism. The basis of society, that is, rested upon the *villein*, or serf, rather than on the slave, and from the serfs society tapered up to the king. The *villein* was bound to the soil, and the soil was bound reciprocally to him. He owed his lord many onerous duties, but his lord in turn owed produce, military duty, and homage to the king, or to an overlord who in turn owed them to the king—who in his turn owed them, avowedly, to God. In return for these pyramidal acts of homage, each recipient owed corresponding loyalties and protections to the donor, so that the whole network of society was an intricate series of obligations and counter-obligations. Law was local, based upon custom and precedent, and there was no organised police or army force, which accounts largely for the fact that the chief social and moral virtue of the day was loyalty, treachery the most abhorred crime, and rebellion the only means, often, of securing justice.

William's claim to the throne of England was a feudal claim, and as cousin to Harold, his Conquest was little more, in early medieval opinion, than a private quarrel between kinsmen. For England in 1066 was not in any self-conscious sense a nation. It was a part of the great nation of Western Christendom, a nation paradoxically united and divided within itself. It was united by religion and language, for ideally all men were brothers-in-Christ before they were brothers in blood, and the Latin-speaking Church was everywhere. An ecclesiastic could travel from the eastern borders of Germany to the western borders of Ireland without encountering anything which was in an important sense foreign

to him. Christendom was divided, however, in that the common people of each province spoke a different language or dialect, and in that the social structure was cut up and down, in vertical sections, rather than horizontally according to classes.

This division, peculiar to feudalism, provoked rebellion against William, and ultimately changed the English language. The serfs might have been expected to resent the rule of a man whose language they did not understand, but the scope of their lives lay within their own manor lands, and they were probably either indifferent to, or ignorant of, William's coming. The great barons were in a different position, for William was forced to make confiscations of the land of Harold's followers in order to reward his own men. The serf's obligations and privileges went on as usual, whoever might happen to be his overlord, but the barons had to choose between poverty and rebellion. This struggle between the landholders of England and the would-be landholders from Normandy, resulted in William's subjugating the country with a thoroughness which had far-reaching results. He ravaged the North, established himself severely as king, and as a security for future peace practised wholesale confiscation and filled the great estates of England with Normans; so that within a hundred years the upper classes of France and England were practically indistinguishable. With the continued stay of the Normans, with the increasing and far-reaching intermarriages and fusion of blood between the French and the English, the use of the French language became more and more habitual, spreading down from the throne and the castles through the merchants, the lesser landholders and the minor clerics—to every one, in fact, except the most illiterate of the peasantry. Much later, when economic and social factors changed the position of the serf in the world, even the lower classes abandoned the old local dialects. The towns, crowded with people of all classes and

having a large French-speaking population, were probably the chief linguistic melting pots, although the Crusades and the later wars in France took many men of the *villein* class out of the country, and sent them back from long periods of loot and siege, to disseminate among their families and friends whatever foreign speech they might have acquired. At any rate, until 1340 the French tongue had been steadily gaining ground—probably word by word—among the common people, and at about that date the two speeches began to emerge as one—a speech which we may call the new English, and which is, from the point of view of philology, virtually the same language we speak to-day.

In view of these problems of language, it is not surprising that when the Normans came to England they found no poetry and no active literary tradition. French literature was, at the time of the Conquest, just beginning to take fresh spirit and clothe itself in the vernacular tongue. The continuity of the Old English poetry had been broken with the falling away of the heroic order of society, and therefore the French *trouvère* was welcome wherever he could be understood because, among almost bookless people, he satisfied the vital need of entertainment. There was literature of a sort in England, but although it was more often than not in verse, it was seldom poetry. The change from heroic chaos to the ordered chaos of feudalism had destroyed the possibility of reanimating the epic, just as the gradual absorption of Christianity had made unintelligible the ideals motivating such a production as *Beowulf*. Of course the pagan motifs and the heroic traditions survived in oral legend and folklore, and appeared later as part of the material of romance. But as an inspiration this *genre* was dead, and could never again produce spontaneous poetry.

Of the large body of oral literature, much has been lost, much has come down to us only as it was modified by and incorporated into later work. The poetry, until the coming

of the French, was chiefly in the form of the Old English alliterative line such as *Beowulf* employs, and the subject-matter was largely popular in the same sense as are the old ballads, which in the recorded form are later evolutions of very old themes. The epic probably persisted, less hardily than it did in France, but at least in some popular form as the focus for tales of popular heroes. But with the coming of the Normans, the seed of a new tradition was planted.

2

The Middle Ages was a period unique in the history of Western Europe by virtue of its submission to authority, its communal and widespread ideals, its acknowledged sources of inspiration. This spirit is so alien to our own that it tempts us at first to overlook the variations within those limits; to think that individualism was lost with the heroic age until it was born as a philosophy during the Renaissance. But this is obviously a mistake. Medieval Christianity dominated the Christian world, but within its ideals it gave scope to a perfection of the most diverse types. The warrior, the saint, the scholar, the lover, the ascetic, the hermit, the jovial student, the tyrant, the ecclesiastical prince, the man of affairs, the artist and the patron of the arts—although they all expressed their ideals in terms of Roman Catholicism, they were individually more varied and more freely developed than we. The chief difference between the Middle Ages and any other historical period of Western civilisation, is that during the former age men paid homage to one overruling and all-embracing idea, and they were able to do so with no loss of passion and diversity because of the greatness, the elasticity, of that ideal. It could compromise with humanity and print its seal upon every variant temper of mankind; and if the variety of its compromises served in the end to weaken it, the fact that for two hundred years its power was unflinching, is a miracle which cannot but impress an age like our

own, which is almost as manifold in its avowed allegiances as in individual temperaments.

But however diverse the medieval personalities, the age was artistically anonymous. The cathedrals which remain as the material symbols of its glory are the product of unknown hands, and the bulk of its literature was built by equally unknown minds. Here and there we find a name, but the literary absent-mindedness of the greatest period is well exemplified in the ballads, of which we have the early spirit in late form. They are the product of a communal society, with a traditional folklore which could be traced back to many sources at different ends of the earth, but which was welded slowly into an integral whole by people who recognised an all-powerful God. This God had made everything, and had produced a world in which everything was so strange in its manifestations, and yet so simple in its sources, that nothing at all was very strange. Satan of course had great power, and at his feet could be laid any immediate incongruities, but since God had seen fit to make Satan for his own purposes, the ultimate authorship of all diversity could be traced to the heavenly throne. And since the medieval God saw a purpose in the creation of devils, demons, monsters and the intricate hierarchy of archangels, angels and beneficent spirits which infested the universe, surely the medieval man could take for granted that his God could reconcile to his own purposes the bewildering ways of man—ways which were beginning to be revealed by the infiltration of stories from a pagan world, and the already existent traditions of his own pagan ancestors.

This is an over-simplified statement of the amalgamating power of medieval literature, because it implies a conscious effort, where the whole thing simply happened. But the poetry of the period is a unit in spirit and form, and is in its actual material a strange blend of incongruous stuff—details of an Arabian Nights splendour with Celtic legend, Saint's stories and motifs lingering on from Druid days, Ovid's

versions of Hesiod's mythology married most solemnly to Christian theology.

When I speak of the medieval mind I am of course reducing the age to its lowest common denominator, and using as an example the bulk of the people. This is necessary in speaking of any age, for the great minds are always above the contemporary scene in that they cannot be lost behind its tendencies. They speak its language but they interpret it to all ages, and translate the universal concerns of mankind in terms of the life around them. They make something new of what is commonplace to those about them, as Chaucer did, as Dante did. They translate the accidents of time into a region where all races and all ages are one. The poetry of the age was not, of course, actually the product of the people. But the bulk of the work was anonymous, and so we must assume that it was communal in the same fashion that the bulk of literature in any age is communal. The demand ultimately regulates the supply, and most of what has survived from that period of laboriously copied manuscripts must have been widely popular.

This communal mind of the Middle Ages was from our point of view ignorant. Probably there have never been more learned people than the medieval scholars, but the illiterate masses—which, until a late date included most of the nobility—were superstitious, credulous to naïveté, and not given to denying anything, since everything was possible. We call these people ignorant because most of the facts they learned so eagerly were scientifically incorrect, but their knowledge of more important and permanent truths was rich and instinctive to a degree which we to-day, bred on Science and Hard Facts, cannot attain except through great and lonely effort. And if their factual knowledge was faulty, it was at least charming, and shows an ingenious delight in knowledge for its own sake rather than for immediate use:

Form maketh matter known. Matter is cause that we see things that are made, and so nothing is more common and general than matter. And natheless nothing is more unknown than is matter; for matter is never seen without form, nor form may not be seen in deed, but joined to matter. . . .

The four elements are Earth, Fire, Water, and Air, of the which each hath his proper qualities. Four be called the first and principal qualities, that is, hot, cold, dry, and moist: they are called the first qualities because they slide first from the elements into the things that be made of elements. . . .

The Rainbow is impression gendered in an hollow cloud and dewy, disposed to rain in endless many gutters, as it were shining in a mirror, and is shapen as a bow, and sheweth divers colours, and is gendered by the beams of the sun or of the moon. . . .

A spirit is a subtle body. . . . Physicians say that this spirit is gendered in this manner wise. Whiles by heat working in the blood, in the liver is caused strong boiling and seething, and thereof cometh a smoke, the which is pured, and made subtle of the veins of the liver. And turneth into a subtle spiritual substance and airy kind, and that is called the natural spirit. For kindly by the might thereof it moveth the blood and sendeth it about in all the limbs. . . .

Also among metals is nothing so effectual in virtue as gold. . . . For it hath virtue to comfort and for to cleanse superfluities gathered in bodies. And therefore it helpeth against leprosy and meselry. . . .

Madness is infection of the foremost cell of the head, with privation of imagination, like as melancholy is the infection of the middle cell of the head, with privation of reason. Madness cometh sometime of passions of the soul . . . sometime of the biting of a wood hound, or some other venomous beast: sometime of melancholy meats, and sometime of drink of strong wine. . . .

To heal or to hide leprosy, best is a red adder with a white womb, if the venom be away, and the tail and the head smitten off, and the body sod with leeks, if it be oft taken and eaten. And this medicine helpeth in many evils; as appeareth by the blind man, to whom his wife gave an adder with garlic instead of an eel, that it might slay him, and he ate it, and after that by much sweat, he recovered his sight again.

England is the most island of Ocean, and is beclipped all about by the sea, and departed from the roundness of the world, and hight sometimes Albion. . . . And by continuance of time, lords and noble men of Troy, after that Troy was destroyed, went from thence, and were accompanied with a great navy, and fortunèd to the cliffs of the foresaid island, and that by revelation of their feigned goddess Pallas. . . . England is a strong land and a sturdy, and the plenteousest corner of the world, so rich a land that unneth it needeth help of any land, and every other land needeth help of England. England is full of mirth and of game, and men oft times able to mirth and game, free men of heart and with tongue, but the hand is more better and more free than the tongue.

For as Pliny saith, India aboundeth in wonders. . . . Fig trees spread there so broad, that many great companies of knights may sit at meat under the shadow of one tree. . . . Also there be men of great stature, passing five cubits in height, and they never spit, nor have never headache nor toothache, nor sore eyes, nor they be not grieved with passing heat of the sun, but rather made more hard and sad therewith. . . . There be satyrs and other men wondrously shapen. Also in the end of East India, about the rising of the Ganges, be men without mouths, and they be clothed in moss and in rough hairy things, which they gather off trees, and live commonly by odour and smell at the nostrils. And they nother eat nother drink, but only smell odour of flowers and of wood apples, and live so, and they die anon in evil odour and smell. . . .

And other be in Ethiopia, and each of them have only one foot so great and so large, that they beshadow themselves with the foot when they lie gaping on the ground in strong heat of the sun; and yet they be so swift, that they be likened to hounds in swiftness of running. . . . Also some have the soles of their feet turned backward behind the legs, and in each foot eight toes, and such go about and stare in the desert of Lybia.

The properties of bees are wonderful noble and worthy. For bees have one common kind as children, and dwell in one habitation, and are closed within one gate: one travail is common to them all, one meat is common to them all, one common working, one common use, one fruit and flight is common to them all, and one generation is common to them all. Also maidenhood of body without wem is common to them all, and so is birth also. For they are not medlied with service of Venus, nother resolved with lechery, nother bruised with sorrow of birth of children. And yet they bring forth most swarms of children.

The swan feigneth sweetness of sweet songs with accord of voice, and he singeth sweetly for he hath a long neck diversely bent to make divers notes. . . . Always the swan is the most merriest bird in divinations.

3

The beginning of the Twelfth Century coincides in England with the accession of Henry I, the third son of the Conqueror, who ruled for thirty-five years and strengthened the peaceful unity of the country. During this great Twelfth Century three generations of Normans held English land, and the Western world first felt the exciting effects of the Crusades. Gothic architecture evolved during this hundred years, the universities of Paris and Bologna became increasingly large and important, and medieval philosophy made its first notable appearance—philosophy inextricably wedded to theology, and not to be parted from it again until the Eighteenth Century ushered in the modern world. The fact that Western Europe was all one great feudal kingdom under the Pope was never again to be so apparent as it was at this time, when the rulers of France, England, and the German Empire were confusingly intermarried, when the Plantagenet kings started their memorable reign, when the Hildebrandine reforms strengthened the power of the Church to such an extent that the murder of Thomas à Becket was an international tragedy, rather than (as it would have been in any other age) a local act of violence.

This Twelfth Century was a flowering time in poetry, and saw one of the most “profound revolutions in literary tradition of which we have any record”¹ that is, the growth of romance from the old epic. This revolution was not deliberate, was probably not even discernible to contemporaries. It followed the shifting emphasis of actual life, and was proportioned in harmony with the receding horizon which bounded men’s thoughts. It is important to remember that

¹ Ker, *Epic and Romance*.

it followed the actual changes; it did not precede them, or even accompany them step by step. The great epics were all written down long after the events they commemorated had lost political significance. The ballads were given permanent form only after they had ceased being used as spontaneous accompaniments to folk dances which celebrated immemorial pagan rites. Romance took over the epic long after the latter had lost its original heroic emphasis, and Dante immortalised an ideal which had already begun to fade. This does not mean that poetry is not contemporary. The poet is necessarily of his age. His attitude toward life, his faith or lack of faith, his way of thinking of things which persist from age to age as problems—the terms of his questions to life—all these elements which are of such great though secondary importance in any artistic record of life, will be coloured by the secret forces which are always moulding the immediate future from the immediate past. Every age is in this sense an age of transition, and every mind is from this cause the battle ground of old and new tendencies. But the poet speaks, or should speak, from those deepest parts of his mind where such ideas as are of importance to him have really acquired a permanence, a background of meaning, so that when he squares them with his intellect—that is, when he speaks them in terms of the life around him—he will have expressed at least a part of what is to come by virtue of the fact that the seeds of the future always lie in the past and the present.

The change from epic to romance was a gradual and inevitable growth, due to the changing tastes of those who patronised poetry and the arts—that is, the educated, wealthier classes. These were naturally the first to profit by the international culture of Christendom. They were quickened to curiosity by the unknown marvels of a world which was becoming larger through knowledge and smaller through increased travel, and romance followed the new direction of

their interests. In England, *Beowulf* had been the last expiring speech of the epic, but in France the *chansons de geste* were abundant and replete with vitality. They were popular, and far simpler than the Germanic epics, and they celebrated the deeds of a king and his followers. There was little drama in them, apart from the basic themes. They were well constructed narratives, told in stock terms, using conventional moods and sentiments rather than actually imagined passions. They are impressive as a large and homogeneous group but it is only in a few rare examples, of which the most notable is the *Chanson de Roland*, that they are at all memorable.

During the Twelfth Century the changed temper of men's minds evolved something new from these old forms, and although the *chanson de geste* in a debased form still survived among the common people, the educated, leisured classes developed the romance elements which had always been latent in the epic. The likenesses are perhaps not at once apparent, since the tone is so deceptively different, but they correspond closely to the survivals of an older way of life in a new and exciting age. The emotion of the romance, the high tragedy for which it strives, is still the old epic theme of divided loyalty and the treachery that gains significance from the fact that society was ordered entirely by personal loyalty; just as the virtue of the one and the horror of the other had survived from the disorder of heroic days into the only slightly less disorderly days of feudalism. Ganelon brought about the death of Roland by treachery, and Lancelot is careful to receive the accolade from Guinevere so that his love for her may not be treachery to Arthur. The same problem exists in both types, although the tone and the emphasis, the trappings of the latter, make it seem an alien growth.

The Twentieth Century is likely to think of romance as opposed basically to realism, so that when we look back to the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries and recognise the con-

flicting issues as romance and epic, it is with difficulty that we can refrain from carrying back our own critical preoccupations and identifying the epic with realism. The two have some elements in common. In fact, if we define realism in its best and largest terms, if we can loose it from the indignities of modern connotations, it may stand, in the argument, side by side with the epic. For in so far as realism means that the dramatic imagination behind it suffers the characters to mould their own story, that a selective process is at work on the problem of showing the protagonists of the drama in scenes which put the reader under no obligation of transferring one set of ideas to a realm in which they do not ordinarily hold—in so far as this is realism, realism may be substituted for epic. In other words, Achilles is an epic and realistic, not a romantic, hero. He is always more thoroughly some one we might at any time meet than he is the son of a minor Greek goddess who held him by one heel when she dipped him in the waters of invulnerability. Bevis of Hamptoun, on the other hand, is a romantic character because the things that happen to him have nothing whatever to do with his own qualities or defects as a person: they are arbitrary, imposed upon him by the narrator of his story, and he not only does nothing to deserve or to occasion them, but he is unchanged after they have happened. He fights with a dragon which again and again wounds him mortally, but there is a magic well just behind Bevis, and as often as he is wounded and falls back into the well, he is healed and endowed with superhuman strength. This is romance, however low it may rank in the scale; just as on a higher plane "The Ancient Mariner" is romance; not because the mariner has dealings with the dead and is haunted by an avenging power not of this earth, but because he is not a person so much as he is a symbol of an idea in Coleridge's mind. "The Ancient Mariner" is realistic enough in detail, but the deepest source of our non-esthetic interest in the poem is that it

might just as well have been ourselves who committed the symbolic crime of shooting the albatross, whereas we have to imagine ourselves turned into Odysseus himself—Odysseus the unique personality—before we can find our way in and out of Polyphemus's cave. There is a world of difference between "The Ancient Mariner" and *Bevis of Hamptoun*, but both are romantic, and the difference between them is not so vast as the difference between either of them and the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.

One of the chief marks of the medieval romance is its sophistication. The bulk of the work is that of unknown people, and therefore this fact seems a trifle paradoxical; we are accustomed to thinking of sophistication as existent only in the exceptional person. But whereas the epics are objective and impersonal, giving the impression—whatever the facts—of having emanated from a whole people, we feel that the romances are the consciously articulate work of different individuals. Even in cases where several minds worked to the completion of one story, it is usually apparent where one left off and the other began. With them story-telling became an art, as well as a spontaneous diversion and a business, and the medieval authors are "literary" in most modern senses of the word. The language and the old popular stories on which most of the plots are founded, sometimes lend them a spurious air of naïveté and freshness; but the romance writers knew what they were doing. They introduced into their stories all kinds of "romantic machinery"; they exaggerated the chivalric institutions of their day; and the result is a worldly and on the whole rather tiresome literature, made to a formula which almost any second-rate poetaster could follow with ease and success. There is not, as Mr. Ker has pointed out, much romance as we are accustomed to think of it in these products of a school, for any such theory-built work, except at its inception by an original and imaginative mind, is sure to be second-rate, extravagant,

and dependent for its effect on a shoddy and apparent sleight-of-hand.

However disappointing the actuality, the development of romance proper is important because it is the first indication of what we may call the modern literary tradition, and because it is the neatest illustration one can find of a great homogeneous literature springing from contemporary conditions rather than deriving directly from the special source of a few great minds. The history of English poetry after Chaucer is never again so easily recognisable in its component parts, for not only was Chaucer superficially very much in the tradition of his day and therefore popular, but he was eminently original and therefore sure to be imitated; and it was after he died that the printing press began disseminating books. The immediate effect was that every one imitated Chaucer, and the ultimate effect was that poets began consciously to mould themselves to models they admired, rather than to swing unconsciously into those dictated by their own assimilation of their age.

One of the factual sources of romance was the importation into western Europe of Oriental stories, and the tales brought home by the warriors of the Crusades—descriptions of the luxurious material aspect of the Eastern civilisation, which furnished the romance writers with a new impulse toward embroidery. In addition to descriptions, the changing state of economics was producing a new wealth, an actual acquisition of moveable possessions. The furniture of life was constantly increasing, and the romances are most of them top-heavy with minutely described trappings, and intemperate ejaculations of descriptive material. This was a new element in poetry, which had heretofore been a somewhat grim and sinewy affair, and it is an element which has never lost its effectiveness for the popular mind.

Ovid and Vergil constituted another and vital source for romance. The story-tellers of the Middle Ages were chil-

dren of their day in that although they were thirsty for knowledge they were careless of tradition and sources. They had no sense of anachronism and the only thing they looked for in the classics was the actual material, the story. Characters were taken over whole into the contemporary scene—just as the pagan religions had been reconciled with the spirit of Catholicism—and Dido, Troilus, Paris and Medea became heroes and heroines of the age of chivalry, and spoke endless subtleties of love. And it is in their treatment of love themes that the Middle Ages made their most notable and lasting contribution to poetry, for almost every idea and aspect of this passion which the Western World has inherited, can be traced back to the Twelfth Century in France and its revolutionary conception of a new ideal of love.

This ideal was a perfectly understandable offshoot of the Catholic faith, and of the united peoples who ordered their lives in conformity to that faith; or rather, since it is necessary to remember that the ideal is never for many people the actual, it was an offshoot of a compromise between the Catholic faith and the exigencies of worldly life. The practical demands of that faith were stringent. First of all they postulated that man was a sinful and tainted creature, who was yet possessed of an immortal soul, for whom a God had willingly died, for whom the world was especially created, for whose particular benefit the suns and planets swung steadily in their courses. The whole visible creation was only a scene set for the action of the "drama of man's salvation," and this world would last until the Judgment Day should take place in 1800. The world, therefore, being doomed, was not a place in which to seek the fullness of life, but a vale of tears in which to perfect the soul for Paradise and Eternity, and perfection of the soul was dependent upon a strict morality—that is, obedience to God and the Church, both of whose laws were identical and quite clearly defined.

Now the Catholic Church had two nuclear points of in-

heritance—Neo-Platonism as typified in Plotinus, with its mystical assurance that knowledge did not matter so long as one kept one's soul intact, in tune with the all-pervading mind of God; and the Aristotelian passion for attaining an exact picture of the Universe. Both these elements helped build the early Church. One conferred, from the Greek councils, its elaborate metaphysical doctrines later refined by the schoolmen; and the other elaborated via the Stoic Latin fathers, "an ethical and human doctrine of salvation," which produced in the long story of Christianity the mystics and visionaries who could subscribe to Tertullian's doctrine of *Credo quia impossibile est*. With these elements was fused, inextricably, the Oriental idea that although the dualism of mind and spirit is incontestable, the chief task of man is a denial of the flesh in so far as is necessary in order to keep the spirit pure and humble before God.

The very beautiful and elaborate synthesis which the Church made of these divergent elements—a synthesis which in *The Divine Comedy* informs the universe with a crystal light—dictated one strict mode of conduct to men, and one end in view by virtue of this conduct, but it allowed for those individual eccentricities of soul which in the early great days of the Faith flared into such diverse and splendid products of orthodoxy as we see in Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Bernard, Hugo of Saint Victor, John of Fidanza called Bonaventura, and innumerable others. But the Church was thoroughly conscious of the fact that the real saint is as rare as the real sinner, and it said in effect that so long as men strove for the ideal they might be permitted to strive for it in their own way; that is, whenever sin was acknowledged as sin and not justified by heretical reasoning, the sin would be forgiven. In the highest terms of the spirit this is not a compromise but an essential truth; but no organisation so vast as was the Catholic Church could deal in all its ramifications with the highest terms of

the spirit, so the truth became in effect a compromise, and pointed the way out for many people. It pointed the deeply religious toward the kind of reform which later assembled its differences into what we call the Reformation; and in the earlier days of integrity in the Church it pointed the pious but unsaintly in various directions—the warriors to the Crusades, the scholars to an often heretical philosophy, the poets to a deification of love.

Marriage was a sacrament, and love within its bonds had, of course, the full sanction of the Church. But marriage in the Middle Ages was usually, for the landed classes, a business affair. Property was the greatest source of wealth, and parents augmented their worldly goods by joining their estates through marriage between the heirs. Betrothal and even marriage was common between infants and twelve was not considered too early an age for a girl to become a wife. And so, although love must often have developed within the marriage bond, love as a sudden and irresistible experience was more often than not extra-marital; whence came the solemn law of the Court of Love, so humorous to modern ears, that there could be no love between husband and wife. Combined with these factors—the desire to ennoble the earthly passion in terms of the spiritual, the sinfulness of any sexual indulgence outside the marriage tie, and the loveless marriage—combined with these contributing elements, was the growing cult of the Virgin. The tenderness, the chivalric love of the medieval man and woman for the Mother of God is one of the most touching themes of all their poetry. An indefinable note creeps into the work with Her name, however crude the verse which precedes and follows the theme. The best known and most beautiful stories of the Virgin, such as “Our Lady’s Tumbler” could only have been written in an age of faith, though the late Middle Ages could still make beautiful use of this material, as in the “Prioress’s Tale” as given by Chaucer:

O martir, souted to virginitee,
 Now maystou singen, folwing evere in oon
 The whyte lamb celestial—

Even in the Fifteenth Century, when faith was growing dull,
 we find such a carol as the following:

I sing of a maiden
 That is makeles;
 King of all kings
 To her son she ches.

He came al so still
 There his mother was,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the grass.

He came al so still
 To his mother's bour,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the flour,

He came al so still
 There his mother lay,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the spray.

Mother and maiden
 Was never none but she;
 Well may such a lady
 Goddess mother be.

Such pure simplicity of faith as love of the Virgin inspired was certain to affect men's attitude toward earthly love, and the change of tone in men's attitude toward mortal women, as the cult of Mary spread during the Middle Ages, is apparent to the most casual reader.

This new spirit of romantic love was a very real spirit at first, although the records of it are full of the artificial exaggerations to which all romance literature was prone. It is impossible to separate this spirit, with whatever significance

it had for the age which evolved it, from the contemporary jugglings with the theme. So far as we can tell, the literary conventions of romantic love originated in Provence. This southern province had maintained an unbroken classical culture throughout the Dark Ages; its love poetry seems to have been a natural flowering, the seeds of which were carried during the Twelfth Century all over the civilised West, and have become the roots of almost all the lyric poetry of later Europe. The influence was undeniable, and the horrible blot of the Albigensian Crusade points to the fact that the district of Provence was influential and in contact with other centres of Christendom. But although there is no way of discovering the devious underground currents by which chivalric lore spread and took hold of men's minds, it is evident that among the leisure classes—the only classes which are involved in a discussion of this early romance literature—the ideal became universal in the close-knit communal mentality of the Middle Ages. The spread of ideas, the geography and chronology of tendencies, can never be stated exactly. Nor can we know to-day how seriously the medieval men and women were concerned with this absorbing, exacting science of love, how deeply it influenced their way of life, and how much of it was merely a literary fashion. A few points, however, are clear. The worst exaggeration of the "school" has not the fantastic quality against the background of the Middle Ages that it has in the alien light of our own day; the exaggerations are of a piece with the times. The underlying conception of love as the highest good, having its own peculiar and ruthless morality, its compulsive code which transcends the workaday loyalties; love which by ennobling the lovers thereby ennoble any ignominy which its immediate gratification may entail—this conception has never lost its force for the western nations, and the modern world of hasty marriages and hasty divorces pursues it as earnestly,

though not so consciously, as did the most infatuated devotee of the medieval Court of Love.

At any rate, whatever the back-reaching causes and the immediate inspirations, the ideal was a reality, and no romance, however full of minor exaggerations, or sophistical rationalisations, is more true to the chivalric ideal than is the story of Heloïse and Abélard, or of Petrarch and Laura. If we consider it fantastic that the medieval Court of Love decreed as a law that love could not exist within the marriage tie, we must remember what the marriage tie usually meant. We must remember that marriage cancelled the hope of advancement in the Church, and that outside the Church there was no path open for the scholar, no chance of advancement for any one not of noble birth. And remembering this, the Court of Love decree can not help reminding us of Heloïse's passionate desire that Abélard should not marry her, so that his life and their love might remain free of all fettering obligations. And when one is on the point of laughing at the solemn list of emotional duties to his Lady which were laid upon the lover, duties which were really rites, such as pallor, swoons, sighs, groans, poems, fear, and a blind reverence, one remembers that Petrarch languished outside the gates of Laura's home all his life—either actually or in spirit—and immortalised in his sonnets a love which derived most of its power from the ideal emanating from the worship of the Mother of God.

Out of all the literature to which the ingenuities and refinements of the Court of Love ideal were devoted, there is very little poetry. The romance in the English tongues, aside from the *Brut* of Layamon, never reached the peculiar perfection of type which it achieved in France, where Chrétien de Troyes, though not a poet in our sense of the word, was at least a superb decorator and finished technician; or in Germany, where the best surviving version of the Tristan cycle was made by Gottfried von Strassbourg. Much

of the verse in England was, of course, composed in Anglo-Norman French, but the fact that there was at that time no decisively national cast of mind among the educated classes, combined with the linguistic difficulty, definitely precludes us from considering such work in a study of English poetry.

4

Since the Middle Ages really broke under adversity—that is, since the institutions typical of the time lost their effectiveness through various causes and had to be shaped into more satisfying compromises, the best way of setting a backdrop for the two poets who represent the death of medievalism, Langland and Chaucer, is to sketch briefly the abuses and disasters of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries.

The Thirteenth Century was in some ways the most stirring and self-conscious period of the English Middle Ages. John's unfortunate reign at its inception "marked the end of England's part as a cog in the continental machine." But England had no idea of this. It is only in the light of what followed that we can say it, and to the contemporary mind England was still bound indissolubly to France, and only less intimately to the rest of the papal kingdom. And meanwhile the wool trade with Flanders was beginning to bring prosperity to the country, French vernacular literature was at its height (it prospered later in England than in France, as the dissemination of the language took time) and the University of Oxford was growing in numbers and importance.

But underneath this excited expansion, the ultimate causes of dissolution were fermenting. The way was being paved for nationalism. England did not become an isolated, self-conscious nation until the Reformation, but such a great change, involving as it did the loss of an universally binding

religion and the complete assimilation of two predominant strains of blood and two languages, necessarily began long before the result was at all apparent, and one can easily see, from 1200 on to 1348, when the Black Death prostrated the country, the beginnings of change.

The most inclusive cause of dissolution was the corruption within the Church, for it is the integrity of the Catholic faith that marks for us the unique significance of the Middle Ages. The cause of corruption, of course, was the fact that an united Christendom was an ideal, just as any sort of unity is still an ideal. The system devised may be most ingeniously contrived to hold together in amity and harmony the several parts; but any system must be propelled by human beings, and will soon in their hands become less an ideal method than a battle ground for selfish personal methods. The papal ideal became less ideal in proportion to the number of fallible human beings who had the chance to abuse it. The surprising thing is not that it broke down, but that it maintained centuries of glory.

The Church owned approximately one third of the wealth of England. This meant that a large share of English revenue was sent regularly to Rome, where the Pope used the money to prosecute his own private wars; and at the end of the Fourteenth Century, England had the strange experience of seeing her own money used against her. She was extremely poor at this time, almost bankrupt, and struggling to carry on the French wars. The underlords of the great church holdings paid their money tribute to French overlords, who of course used the proceeds against the English army in France. In those days of more simple economics this injustice was apparent even to people at large, and it increased the hatred of the laity for the wealthy and powerful clergy.

This particular evil, absenteeism, was a problem in all English landholding circles, but especially in relation to the

Church. William Rufus's quarrel with Anselm and Pope Gregory VII over investitures, had ended in a compromise which was really a victory. The problem was whether the King or the Pope should invest the cleric with the insignia of his office. The compromise stated that the Ring and the Staff, as symbols of the spiritual power, should be granted by the Church, but that the recipient should do homage to the Crown for his temporal possessions. This resulted in the right of the English king to fill the sees of the country with the men of his choice, and the relegation of the Papal power to that of confirmation. The result had two important effects. It meant, first, that the bishoprics of England were filled with men who, in general, were chosen simply because they were acute and hard working men of affairs. The king, very honestly from his point of view, could not afford to leave the management of large temporal estates, and the command of men and money which those estates implied, to men who were only spiritually fitted for office. It also meant that the king, in order to keep the good will of the Pope, left to him, as much as possible, the appointments to non-strategic offices; which in turn meant many absentee landholders—men who supposedly paid substitutes to fill their offices, and lived abroad in their native countries on the revenue derived from the English peasantry and of such of the nobility and lesser knights of the shire as held land under them.

From this situation, called "provision," arose a complaint which was perhaps less loudly proclaimed than the economic injustice attendant upon it, but which must in the end have lent enormous, incalculable strength to the loss of faith by the people at large, and the growing welcome which came to be given to those reforming priests who spread Wycliffe's doctrines and prepared the ground for Protestantism in England. The absentee clergy, we learn from contemporary sources, were lax in providing substitutes. The cheapest

person who was willing to fill their places was usually the person who filled them, and this, combined with the fact that the residing clergy were in general growing more worldly and correspondingly lax in the discharge of their spiritual duties, resulted in a most noticeable poverty of competent parish priests. The parish priest was the poorest of all church officials, the lowest of the secular clergy. Therefore the parish priest was the only person, except the preaching friar, whose function it was to care for the flock of any local church, and as the friars grew steadily more venal, more inclined to charlatanism of all sorts, the parish priests grew not only more scarce, but, owing to the starvation salaries they drew, more and more ignorant as a class, and unable competently to fulfil their duties. They often, as a matter of fact, were paid nothing at all, and the result was that those who were self-seeking either deserted or were extortionate with the oppressed peasantry, and those who were tender-hearted and honest did their work against great odds and joined the lower classes in their bitterness against the higher clergy and the nobility. It is obvious that a situation of this sort could in the end lead only to religious apathy on the part of the people at large. They might for a long time have remained ignorant of the worldly corruption of the Church at large; but they could not ignore indifference and corruption and disaffection among those who, to all intents and purposes, were for them representatives of the Pope, and embodiments of the word of God.

The Church had, in fact, reached a point of power and wealth which made any immediate reform impossible. Most of the men in power had attained their positions under the prevailing system, and this precluded any ardour on their part for proposed changes of order.

The incidents of the Peasants' Rising (1381) were indicative of this lost loyalty of the people to the Church. The most venomous attacks of the marching peasants seem to have

been directed against the wealth and power of the monasteries, attacks which the piety of the true Middle Ages could never have conceived, much less countenanced, attacks which could only have come from people who had not necessarily lost the essentials of religious belief, but who had certainly made a sharp division either between their God and the Church who symbolised that God, or between the Church which symbolised God and the men who symbolised the Church. Either division would have been unthinkable two hundred years before, and its existence at this date was one sign among many of the undignified and venal decadence of the once glorious Catholic Church, now warring against itself as its rival Popes schemed and laid plots from Avignon and Rome.

Out of all this confusion and change there came a voice crying in the wilderness, the voice of one William Langland concerning the vision of Piers the Plowman. At least, this voice, raised in 1362, has for us the isolated force of a voice in the wilderness, although it is possible that in terms of lost literary tradition it represents the most effective and therefore the surviving voice of a multitude of others. Complaints and satires, in crude homely dialect verse, were common enough at that time, and there are even indications among the scanty manuscript remains that the peculiar allegorical form of this powerful poem was in vogue among the peasantry. But whatever the tradition behind *Piers Plowman*, the poem itself startlingly transcends any group literature of the period.

Chaucer was a contemporary of Langland, and these two men, who represent two extremes of the disparate thought which marked the loss of unity in the late Middle Ages, represent also, it seems to me, the two most extreme poles of poetic endeavour. Langland is the man of spirit, speaking, like Milton, because he must, because he is so consumed with a blinding revelation—in his case, as in that of Shelley,

the revelation of wrong and injustice—that he can not for his soul's peace keep silent. Chaucer is the man of letters, speaking in the first instance because his ability to speak memorably swings him smoothly into a tradition. Langland is a fanatic, with a single vision which penetrates deep into life; Chaucer is a man of the world, tolerant and urbane, with a manifold and keen insight into human nature. Langland wrestles with the soul of his age; Chaucer is without effort master of its mind. In other words, Langland attempted to write great poetry, and Chaucer succeeded greatly in writing poetry which made no attempt to be great; which attempted, really, none of the things which by our definition distinguishes poetry from prose and verse; and which, therefore, we need not call poetry at all.

So much has been said about Chaucer the superb craftsman, Chaucer the charming and amusing bystander at the Comedy of Life, and Chaucer the great dramatist, that there is no necessity here for repeating, and no space for quoting. But it is by defect of his very virtues that Chaucer is not a great poet, and therefore it is necessary, in order to orient him in his age, never to lose sight for a moment of the qualities which place him, not low in the rank of poets, but at the head of an altogether different order of artists. The fact that Chaucer could write verse which for smoothness, supple grace, and charm few men have equalled and very few surpassed, does not necessitate our judging him as a poet. We may, if we like, accept his verse as an arbitrary medium, and, granting him mastery of it, examine the essentials of his work; we may grant that he could say poetically anything he wished to say, without thereby taking for granted that what he had to say was necessarily the stuff of poetry.

It is a commonplace of popular tradition that the poet is deficient in humour. The reason for this is undoubtedly a confusion made by identifying actual poetry with the poet

who wrote it; for it is true that no poetry, at its best and purest moments, is in itself humorous. It may provoke laughter in the reader by its very earnestness, its lack of the proportion we expect in everyday life, its single vision which ignores the thoughtfully balanced scale of values presided over by the "thin feasting smile" of the Comic Muse. Any great poem may be funny to any number of people who are unable, or unwilling, to identify themselves, or to be swept into identity, with a passionate cry for something which is not allied to their own immediate concerns. It may be funny to those whose philosophy is not concerned with words, and even at times to those who are usually lovers of poetry.

The truth of the matter is that the born ironist, the true disciple of humour, is one of the rarest creatures who takes human shape. I am not sure, even, that he has any more authenticity than the unicorn, although here and there men have successfully worn his livery. The disproportion in every living man and woman, between the ideal and the reality, the appearance and the actuality—the distinction between their lives as they experience them moment by moment and their lives as they may be summed up to other peoples' satisfaction on a small headstone—these irreconcilable elements which produce most of the unexpected contrasts which make us laugh, are from another point of view the contrasts which make us weep, and it is to be doubted if any one ever lived who could so consistently orient his own tragedies in the universal comedy of man, as to deserve the title of thoroughgoing ironist. I use the word ironist rather than humourist because irony is, as it were, the poetry of humour, and extremely difficult of attainment. Many men have consistently made fun of everything, and thereby earned the title of humourist, but there is no evidence that in private, through every heartache and misery, they consistently made fun of themselves, which is what it is to be a real ironist. A man like Heine, whose humour is inextricably a part of his bitter

consciousness of tragedy, and who for that reason induces painful smiles rather than care-free laughter, is a different order of being from a man like Sterne, who, whatever his deeper personal philosophy may have been, wrote from the point of view of one who sees more comedy than tragedy; who said, "And laugh, my lord, I will, and as loud as I can, too."

But it is very easy to laugh at poetry, and, therefore, by a quick act of illogical identification, at the poet. When we read:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

it might be easy to laugh if our nature were not predominantly poetic, or if we were not at the moment of reading, experiencing for ourselves the prick of the thorns of life. A jolly householder, replete with an excellent dinner and momentarily free enough from worry to be forgetful of those moments when he has quailed before tragedy, may well find in Keats' cry for

. . . a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green, . . .

an hyperbolic and therefore funny demand for a drink. Or, knowing more of the poet's prim and pedantic dignity than of his soul as it is seen in his poetry, the same worthy man might, on reading the words, "Great God! I'd rather be a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn," have a sudden and ludicrous vision of vine-leaves draped about a gaitered Wordsworth.

In other words, poetry demands from the reader what Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief"—that is, the temporary assumption that man is an important creature, whose desires and thoughts and ultimate destiny are of some value in the scheme of things. And the ironist can never for

a moment make this assumption without at that moment ceasing to be an ironist. The humourist can not make the assumption without thereby sacrificing excellent stuff for laughter, and no thoroughgoing humourist can make many such sacrifices and retain his reputation.

There is, then, no room in poetry for humour. Irony, being a bitter consciousness of disproportion between the ideal and the actual, has, of course, as much right in poetry as any other point of view native to the poet's passion. But once kindled, passion is likely to become a raging fire, and within the range of its heat the dispassionate objectivity necessary to true irony usually either itself takes fire, or shrinks away and seeks a more tranquil resting-place.

However, in saying that poetry is not a happy home for humour I am not in any way implying that the poet is necessarily deficient in the comic spirit. It is true that every poet is more or less of a fanatic, whenever his poetic faculties are working together at white heat; for a fanatic is only one who believes that some definite thing or other is more important than anything else in the whole world. It is therefore true that the exquisite, slight disproportions which provoke laughter can never even reach up as far as the fanatic's preoccupation, much less topple its balanced eminence, and consequently one might safely postulate that the poet's sense of humour is, at the moment of conception and composition, shoved into the background along with everything else which is not of immediate use to him. But the important part of it all is that the comic sense *does* stand mightily in the background, and works along with the whole integral consciousness (of which it is integrally a part) in the poet's selection and formation of material. What a poet is will be implicit in what he avoids saying as surely as it will be apparent in what he says, and since the temptations to overstatement offered by the unconscious material are innumerable and powerful, it is evident that the unerring tact

and taste of his instinctive selections will be an important guide to the inclusive elements of his genius. If a serious and impassioned poet is never, or very seldom, unconsciously funny—that is, to reverse the usual figure, if his intensity is winged with restraint—we may take it for granted that his sense of humour has done a creative task in the excision of all discordant and distracting elements.

I can illustrate what I mean in two great men. Wordsworth, I think I may say without risk of transportation, had little or no comic sense, and if he is often excluded from the rank of the few greatest poets it is largely as a result of this deficiency. Not even those who prefer Chaucer to Wordsworth would want the latter's ecstasy broken with irrelevant wit, or the old, unhappy, far-off things to refer to humorous anecdotes. But Wordsworth's native defect was a lack of discrimination, an inability to realise the difference between the sublime and the ridiculous of which he, as well as lesser men, was all compact. In short, he took himself as seriously as he took his moments of vision—a confusion which is natural to man's vanity, but is in most men tempered and disciplined by a sense of humour. Because Wordsworth had moments when he could see the trailing clouds of glory, he was rather inclined to feel it his duty to assume them everywhere and to make up meanings for them. He might easily have been capable, after conscientious meditation, of finding "elevated thoughts" in a description of the breakfast-table; but such a description and such a conscientious interpretation could never be anything but funny, set forth in a form long native to the true lift of the spirit, unless an intense emotion had originally produced the conception *and had overruled the poet's native sensitiveness to its comic implications*. Given this sensitiveness, the poet will instinctively reject anything he cannot infuse with a "high seriousness." . . . "William tired himself with seeking an epithet for the cuckoo," wrote Dorothy Wordsworth. Exactly.

When William was writing his great poetry he may indeed have found himself suddenly weary or even exhausted; but we may be sure that he did not "tire himself."

Shakespeare is the poet who to my mind best illustrates the participation of humour in the least humorous poetry; not at all because he wrote comedy, but because he was able to write unerring tragedy. If every comic line of the plays had been lost, we should be safe in granting to him all the fantastic smiles of Mercutio and all the gusty laughter of Falstaff and Bottom. The attributes of these characters are implicit in the unfailing touch which converted a series of rather crude Old Wives' tales into highest tragedy. Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, like all tragic figures, are from some points of view funny, but Shakespeare's genius informed them throughout with a power which precludes in the reader or listener the functioning of those points of view; or rather, since entering into a conception of such an imagination as Shakespeare's is a creative process, I should say that his genius forces us to use the whole range of our sensibilities in the exact proportions, with exactly the emphasis, which his conception imposes upon us. That is, all the experience and wisdom and insight we possess, and all the sense of the ridiculous through which and from which we garner experience and wisdom and insight, are caught up in the author's interpretation, converted to his own ends; and so long as these qualities and the possible points of view which, separately, they might impose on us, are satisfied in the delicate adjustment which makes of them, temporarily, a whole, there is no danger of an irrelevant mood's dispersing them and thus bringing about an alien point of view. The line between tragedy and comedy can never be predicted or fixed with a theory. It shifts unendingly, and is visible only to the most acute eye and the most sensitive wisdom.

All this is implied in the old maxim that only the author of great comedy can write great tragedy. It is implied in

the patent truism that the most inclusive natures create the most inclusive beauty. But so far as I know there has never been an artist who was equally great in his comic and tragic moods, nor has there been one who has ever been both tragic and comic at exactly the same moment. The two things are mutually exclusive, as either is a matter of emphasis—and comic tragedy is no less tragic because it makes us think, in effect, "If this weren't so sad I could laugh at it"; nor, conversely, is tragic comedy any the less comic because it makes us think, "If this weren't so funny I could cry about it." Both the comedy and the tragedy, in fact, are most purely themselves, they most truly fulfil their definitions, when they use the whole complexity of mind and emotion for their own purposes.

This is what I mean when I say that true irony is rarely the stuff of great poetry. The fusion of points of view usually disparate into tragi-comedy or comi-tragedy is one of the most important aspects of dramatic irony, but the thoroughgoing ironist could never sacrifice either point of view for the other and remain thoroughgoing. For this reason, that exactly balanced differences tend to cancel each other, a philosophy based on irony would be essentially sterile. A philosophy which embraces and employs irony is altogether a different matter, and here I am back to my opening remarks on the nature of poetry. The great poet has something to say—something which orders into a personal emphasis all the world around him and all the world within him. And so his conceptions, the underlying motive of his speech, will never be impartial, or reasonable in a common-sense and universal fashion; not even in the conception of the greatest dramatist, for though the latter will never make people come alive and fulfil themselves in his story without using in their creation his whole wealth of impartiality and reason and common sense, he can only make his audience come alive to friendship or enmity with his

characters, and care tremendously what happens to them, by an intensely personal though unexpressed application of the story to himself. In other words, we can write a thousand books on the moral significance of "King Lear" without even approaching the intricate adjustment of personality which led Shakespeare to write it. In yet other words, I believe that the impulse behind Shakespeare's tragedies is exactly that which lies behind the sonnets, and that Shakespeare was primarily a poet and only secondarily a dramatist.

And so when I say that Chaucer was primarily a dramatist and secondarily a poet, I am of course juggling with terms. But criticism always necessitates that, and I can phrase the idea in no better way, although I can amplify it. The reason for my belief is that I find in Chaucer none of the "high seriousness" of aim which I confess I can not but expect to find in poetry. This does not mean that Chaucer's humour stands in my way; it means that it stood in his way in so far as he aspired to be a poet.

Chaucer, however, was great enough not to aspire for anything and fail. I doubt if he for one moment thought of himself in any of the somewhat grandiloquent terms we now employ in poetical criticism. Chaucer, as a dramatist or novelist, was interested in the panorama of humanity, and in writing of it as only he could write. He was not at any moment in the predicament of the man who tried to be a philosopher and found that somehow cheerfulness was always "breaking in." Chaucer *was* a philosopher, who chose to say many wise and serious things in an oblique fashion, and since his native slant happened to be humorous, he succeeded chiefly in that seriousness was never breaking in; it did its incorporating and excluding work in the same back-stage fashion in which Shakespeare's comic sense purified his tragedy.

Chaucer lived during one of the most troubled and tragic periods of English history. He saw the Black Death mowing its way through the country. He saw corruption and dis-

sension everywhere—the nobles against King Richard, the people against the court, the court and the people against the Church. During his long government service England was at war with France, and the peasants held London until they were sent home with false promises and followed with cruel persecution; religion was degraded further by the schism between Rome and Avignon. The land was lawless, and in the high places a violent and undisciplined nobility with their bands of armed retainers oppressed the people. And yet we find in his work only three references to these troubles: a ballad of advice to Richard, a humorous reference to Jack Straw's disorderly men, and a ballad about the "blissed folk" of "The Former Age":

Allas, allas! now may men wepe and crye!
For in our dayes nis but covetyse
And doublesse, and tresoun and envye,
Poysoun, manslauhtre, and mordre in sundry wyse.

Chaucer is, however, so essentially of his age, and so generous with life-sized and rounded figures drawn from the life about him, that we take from him by inference some of the spirit of his day. In his satiric but kindly portraits of the very imperfect nine and twenty men and women who rode to Canterbury, we feel the transitional period of the late Fourteenth and early Fifteenth centuries in England; the period during which the old forms of the Middle Ages, empty of faith and dead to usefulness, bound men together still in a pretence of unity. There was little health in the Church, although naturally there were good men in its fold, and the people at large were on this account lacking in reverence, without having reached the point of scepticism which could provoke them to devise a system of worship other than Catholicism. England still felt a family tie with the Continent, and during Chaucer's time was so far from isolation of any sort that although there are many references in his work to countries across the chan-

nel, there is no consciousness that Ireland or Scotland were in any way linked to England's destiny.¹ But the sense of unity within the country was growing slowly, step by step with the dismal failure of the French wars and the spreading use of the new English. This is evidenced by the fact that Chaucer used the dialect of London instead of the Anglo-Norman French which a hundred years before would inevitably have been his medium.

One would not deny Chaucer the passion, the intensity, the high vision of the great poet, simply because he did not see fit to comment on or interpret the spiritual and political catastrophes of his age. It is true that one cannot help making an inference that the patronage of the court was important enough as a means of livelihood to curb in his writings any protest he might have made had he been free to speak with safety. This may or may not be true, but one cannot help surmising it and comparing this state of things with Dante's long life of hardship, due to his inability to make concessions to his patrons. However, the fact remains that in Chaucer's work as it stands, as an expression of what he felt, as a deliberate choice of subject matter, there is no point of view underlying the whole which leads us to try to assume in him an allegiance to any faith. There is no conviction in reading him that he was ever caught up into an enthusiasm greater than himself; that he ever stepped from the edge of the crowd into its disorderly, enthusiastic ranks, or that he ever left it very long for solitude; that he was ever more than an amused and very sympathetic bystander at the comedy. Like Shakespeare, he was superbly able to deal objectively with people, to bring them realistically to life in dramatic scenes, to create them by his ability to throw off the limitations of self and become for the moment some one else. But unlike Shakespeare he never impresses us with the conviction that behind all these

¹ In fact, the Irish were supposed in popular opinion to dine when they could on human hearts, and the devil, it was agreed in southern England, came from Scotland.

people was an unswerving great spirit, seeing life steadily and whole, and creating little worlds which, however complete in themselves, borrow their chief splendour from the light of a secret sun.

There are, it is true, two passages in which I feel Chaucer to be a great poet. Both are as moving and as beautiful as one could wish. The ballad to "Trouthe" is one. The other passage is a sudden oasis in the conventional desert of the "Knightes Tale." Arcite, dying, is bidding farewell to his lady love, Emilye, in the conventional medieval fashion, when suddenly these lines lift the passage to tragic nobility:

What is this world? What asketh man to have?
Now with his love, now in his colde grave
Allone, with-outen any companye.

Here, we think, Chaucer has expressed beautifully the cruel paradox of life and death and love which has wrung a cry from almost every poet who ever lived. But reading on, with the lines still echoing to the end of the story, through the interlude preceding the miller's story, we come upon that bawdy production. And, introducing the clerk Nicholas, hero of most undignified and slapstick adventures of sex in a bed-chamber where, very decidedly, he had lively company, Chaucer, with a glee we can well imagine, writes:

A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye
Allone, with-outen any companye.

The shock of this burlesque of himself, this earthy setting for a line which had cried to heaven,¹ is immeasurably severe;

¹ Of course this illustration is not supposed to be conclusive. I am taking for granted that my readers know Chaucer and will test what I say of him by their own convictions. The double use of the line, "allone withouten any companye" is only one definite fragment of a host of observations which formed my opinion of Chaucer as a poet.

Chronology I am not relying upon. The "Miller's Tale" follows the "Knight's Tale" in the arrangement of *The Canterbury Tales*, but it is not known which was written first, nor does it matter. The illustration stands or falls according to the impression the lines make on each reader.

and as it also heightens immeasurably the comedy of the situation, it proves more than any other single instance I remember Chaucer's true *métier*, his small desire to take man's destiny seriously, which would inevitably preclude his being a great poet. It is as if Shakespeare had written a second song, in a tawdry setting, saying that golden lads and girls all must, as chimney sweepers, come to lust.

Langland, on the other hand, is in intention a poet, although in execution he is far behind the ideal and so far behind Chaucer that we cannot for a moment place him with the poets, and could not for a moment, I imagine, hesitate as to which of the two men we should read for pleasure. In his passionate intensity, his bitter faith in the religion which the Church had defamed, and in his revulsion from the political abuses of his time, Langland stirs us despite the crudities and inadequacies of his verse. Through all his speech and through all the conventional allegory which is confusing and lacking in effectiveness to the modern mind, we recognise a high purpose, an accent of the soul, which marks the author as a man who had absorbed the true spirit of a splendid age which was passing; a man who wrote no great poetry, but who had himself the aspiration of a great poet.

There was, then, no poet who immortalised for us the medieval spirit in England; no one whose abilities, spiritual and intellectual, were of the transcendent order which could have fused together a new and transitory language, the affirmations of an age of faith, and a personal philosophy, into the synthesis which is great poetry and revelation. For this synthesis we can only look to Italy, where Dante brought all the varying doctrines of the Middle Ages into line with his single vision. The divine love of man for woman, dear to romance, is also dear to Dante, but it borrows again the divine aspects it had lost in lesser hands. In Chaucer's *Human Comedy* the age is painted in pure colours, but the living fig-

ures ride off the canvas and out into the dark of nothingness. In *The Divine Comedy* every rich colour of the age is realistically ordered, so that the body of the poem has a rainbow progression which mingles above in the white light of the poet's vision. And under this light every human being he recreated, every idea and institution he salvaged from the world around him, has on it the radiance of that other world which for the men of the Middle Ages gave to life and the accidents of time their sole significance.

Chapter Three

CARPE DIEM

I

The Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries are usually overestimated in the story of European civilisation. Various movements of permanent importance took place within these centuries, but it has been too hastily assumed that the movements were of permanent value. To be sure, it seems as if episodes with such heroic titles as the Renaissance and the Reformation must be both great and good; yet before indulging too generous an enthusiasm, it will be well to ask what was reborn, and into what was anything reformed. In seeking for an answer to these questions, I shall keep in mind still another; namely, to what extent should these centuries be considered as the declining phase of medieval civilisation, and to what extent as the beginnings of the modern world?

The most prominent characteristics of the Renaissance can be grouped under two headings, humanism and individualism. By humanism is meant the spirit which seeks to exploit fully the possibilities of life here, upon this bank and shoal of time, and which, to secure that end, would willingly jump the life to come. Humanism is the reverse of the monastic temper, which fears and flees the world lest it submerge the life of the spirit. Humanism at its best is by no means unspiritual; but it dislikes the dualism which, separating spirit from flesh, honours one while debasing the other. A complete and proper life in this world can only be enjoyed, according to the humanist, by effecting a balanced combination of spiritual and of worldly goods. Neither should be sacrificed to the other, since fullness of experience is the ideal, rather than the old

intemperate striving for spiritual realisation beyond life. In its extreme form, humanism is the philosophy of an urbane and a sophisticated people; it is a somewhat weary, somewhat disillusioned creed, and it marks an end rather than a beginning. The proud improvidence of youth, sacrificing all things for some remote, imagined prize, is alien to humanism, which seeks a more temperate adjustment, and which does not wish to let escape one jot of life's immediate richness while searching for an end which may, after all, prove to have been visionary. Logically applied, humanism should lead toward the so-called golden mean, as it did among the Greeks. It may seem strange to mention the golden mean in connection with such riotous and excessive characters as many of the Renaissance Italians and Englishmen. Yet I believe that the phrase expresses something which is latent in the view of life of these men. Of course, the Renaissance was a period when the energies of Europe were released to the full, a period when all things were attempted with quick enthusiasm. But the ideal remained fullness of life—an ideal which demands temperance, balance, compromise. The men of the Renaissance would not abandon themselves to physical sensation; the pleasures of the spirit were too dear to them. But neither would they seek spiritual development in lieu of all else; for the fullness of life could only be attained by perpetually serving two masters, and this they did with unprecedented violence and success—fighting, brawling, straining after power, adventuring on land and sea, writing poetry, constructing ideal states in the imagination, searching after new forms of beauty and new modes of thought. It is easy to see why the spirits of these men were restless; and I believe that if we knew enough about them we would find that the same thing was true of the Periclean Greeks, who sought a similar ideal, and who seem to us so tranquil in their marble remoteness. Would not Alcibiades have been at home in Florence or Ferrara? And what of the Athenians who achieved, almost si-

multaneously, the temple of the Erechtheum and the slaughter of the Melians—one of the most beautiful and one of the most hideous of human accomplishments? Is not the combination reminiscent of the Borgias, or of the Duke who was well pleased with the portrait of his last Duchess?

“Seize the day,” says the humanist, “but train yourself so that you may seize it at its finest point. Keep your body and your spirit fit, so that each may aid the other in attaining the most perfect experience during the few hours before your sun sets.” Walter Pater has expressed this exactly:

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated and dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? . . . While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend.

The Greek civilisation culminated in this many-sided humanism; and since all its qualities seemed just to fit the qualities of the Hellenic spirit, the Greeks achieved, in art and thought, an adjustment between spiritual and worldly goods which has made their civilisation the Mecca towards which all subsequent humanists have turned. Not even the Athenians, however, were able to build an ordered society on the basis of an orderless and diffusive creed. Rome, when she too was growing old, borrowed Greek culture, though she could never properly assimilate it. And when the medieval civilisation—which had attained its height during the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries—began to notice that the shadows lengthened, it too sought after the fullness of life and grasped at any exquisite experience, “while all melts under our feet.” It is possible to explain this mood as the natural feeling of a so-

ciety which is losing its religious fervour; it is even possible to explain it on an economic basis, as the by-product of the growth of town life and of a rich middle class. The one thing it should not be possible to do is to imagine that humanism was a glad and fresh and youthful spirit bringing light to a world escaping from the Middle Ages. There were suggestions of youthfulness about humanism, to be sure. It reached its finest flowering when the heart had quite gone out of medieval Catholicism, and when men were too painfully conscious that all was melting around them; therefore, it was embraced with eagerness, welcomed as something to believe, something by which to live and in which to have faith, and the first generations of humanists were charmingly intemperate over their much-loved Greek temperance. Such enthusiasm as this is youthful-seeming, and at least shows that the society which experiences it is still capable of a rebirth; but can anybody study the brief and startling beauty of Renaissance Italian art without feeling that it marks the end of an age which has grown old and worldly? If Humanism was young in 1500, what became of it?

There have always been, fundamentally, two ways of looking at life. The Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries illustrate the greatness and triumph of one way, the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries the greatness and triumph of the other. "Do the will of God," said the Thirteenth Century, "and if necessary neglect all else, because that is the only thing which matters in the least." "*In la sua volontade é nostra pace.*" But man can not do the will of God unless he has clear knowledge of what it is. And after following any given interpretation for a long time, he tends to grow distrustful. He reminds himself that many prophets in many ages have defined the will of God, but that no two have ever defined it in the same way. He reminds himself that life affords both splendid and ingenious pleasures, and all manner of beauty, and that these things are to be known on every hand by him who will train

himself to "grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment." So man laments that he has been wasting his brief hours on anything so problematical as the will of God; he rejoices that he is free at last, free to know the fullness of life, to be eclectic and to seek beauty over the whole world: to seek beauty, and to find it in the form of a disturbing woman whose presence "is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire," a woman into whose perplexed loveliness "the soul with all its maladies has passed!" Is not this ambiguous figure the appropriate form of beauty for a civilisation whose wisdom is Montaigne's *Que sais-je*, whose doctrine is Rabelais' *Fais ce que voudras*?

In discussing humanism, I have illustrated it by reference to Latin Europe, because it is only in Latin Europe that this element of the Renaissance is seen in its purity. In England, and in the other countries which experienced the Reformation, humanism is an important influence, but it never developed unhampered, or became the dominant spirit of the age, as it did in Italy. Individualism, however—the other chief component of the Renaissance—came to as full a development in England as it did in any country. Individualism is the reverse of medieval belief in authority, just as humanism is the reverse of the medieval monastic temper. Individualism denies that there is any necessary value in tradition, or in the so-called wisdom of the ages. It asserts that every man's life consists of a series of unique problems, and that his solution of each of these problems has worth only in so far as it is made in the light of an examination of the issues involved in that one particular case, and that no such solution can ever be applicable to any other case, and that, therefore, the only guiding principle which can be offered to a man is that there are no guiding principles, but that each act in his life should be the product of an eternally vigilant self-conscious criticism. This is individualism in its full development, as expressed in

certain modern philosophies.¹ In the Renaissance, however, it existed in a milder form, contenting itself with denying the value of such authority as that of the Catholic Church in religious matters, or of Aristotle in regard to science and philosophy. Frequently, the people who were contemptuous of these particular authorities would accept with passivity the teaching of a reformed church, or of what they took to be Platonism, or of Cicero in the field of rhetoric. From the standpoint of a modern philosopher such as Mr. Warner Fite, it might seem an exaggeration to call the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries individualistic; but from the standpoint of the Middle Ages I think it would seem an obvious truth. Men still sought for an authority to buttress their opinions, but it was *an* authority to which they now turned; there was no longer *one* authority, single and undisputed. "The philosopher" might find Plato quoted against him; "the Church" might have to argue with a German monk. Such recognition of rival authorities is obviously the momentous first step toward real individualism; and once that step had been taken it was easy for men to go a little further and accept total responsibility for their beliefs. In the Seventeenth Century, Milton would still drag in ancient and respected names to fortify a political argument, for that was the accepted procedure in pamphleteering; but in his private life Milton knew no guide save his own spirit. He searched everywhere for illumination and help, but he would not abdicate his final judgment to any institution, or any man, or book.² Such positive, embracing individualism is a product of the Seventeenth Century, a sign of the new order and of the birth of the modern world; Sixteenth Century individualism was mainly an expression of scepticism and dissatisfaction over the old order, a sign of the death of the medieval world.

It is easy to see how this new spirit would assist, and be

¹ Compare Mr. Warner Fite's *Moral Philosophy*.

² Milton believed that the Bible contained divine relation, but that this revelation must be interpreted by each man in the light of his soul. Any one who has read the Bible will understand what latitude this allows.

assisted by, humanism; however, there is a certain way of dealing with the world for which at least a partial individualism is even more necessary than it is for humanism—and that is the way of science. Science presupposes that within its field nothing is true which has not been proved true; in other words, it presupposes the uselessness of tradition. Of course there is no reason why a person should not be authoritarian in matters which pertain to the real world of spiritual values, and yet individualistic in his relation to the world of physical fact. That has been the way of all Catholic men of science, from Galileo to the present day. However, it is certain that mankind tends to adopt one attitude or the other and then to apply it to both worlds and to both kinds of truth. The Middle Ages tended to be authoritarian in their conception of physical things, as well as spiritual; and so science did not flourish in that atmosphere. On the other hand, the modern world, supremely individualistic in its treatment of physical nature, tends to adopt a similar attitude towards the world of the spirit; so to-day organised religion is at almost as much of a disadvantage as was science in the Thirteenth Century.

In individualism we have found an element of the Renaissance which quite definitely attaches it to the modern rather than to the medieval world. Humanism is not restricted to either period. It is a state of soul which comes and goes throughout man's history. We can safely describe it as pagan rather than Christian, sophisticated rather than simple; but it is not the peculiar property of any age. There are some humanists in all periods; however, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries they were a dominant group, and they performed such prodigies in art and life that they have been over-valued ever since. On the other hand, individualism, though by no means exclusively modern, is one of the prominent characteristics of the world to-day, and it will be important to watch its development as mirrored in English poetry. Other ages have been individualistic; for instance, as I said above,

this spirit was an important factor in heroic civilisation. But only the strong man could be individualistic in Germania; the rest had to abide by use and custom traditionally enough, if they were to survive. In the modern world, however, self-determinism is a broadly popular ideal. It is seldom truly practiced, because—like all ideals of merit—it would require an exacting and arduous discipline. Yet in a vague, deteriorated sense, individualism is latent in most contemporary philosophies.

All this suggests that individualism also is a by-product of a highly organised and comparatively safe society—in other words, that both of the most prominent characteristics of the Renaissance—which I have defined as individualism and humanism—may be explained by the far-reaching economic changes which marked the close of the Middle Ages, and that the Renaissance could not have existed unless those changes had first occurred. This does not at all mean that the history of man's spiritual ideals could be written in terms of economics; but it is natural that a close relationship should exist between the two fields, since man, after all, can only express his spirit in terms of the physical world around him. In this particular case, the relationship seems to me fairly clear: During the great days of medieval civilisation, commerce and finance were rigidly restricted, and the growth of anything resembling modern capitalism was hampered. The investing, or the lending, of money for the purpose of receiving interest was considered unjustifiable for Christians; prices for manufactured articles and for labour were fixed at what was believed to be a fair figure; the quality of goods to be used in the manufacture of articles, and also of the work to be done in the process of manufacturing, were fixed as well; and in general everything possible was contrived to discourage what we should call healthy business conditions. However, even as early as the Thirteenth Century—in Italy and Flanders—the moral sanction which supported these restrictions had

begun to weaken.¹ As time passed, and men ceased to regard the Church, or Christian ideals, with the old respect, the natural human impulse to profiteer and plunder began to find freer and freer expression. By the Fourteenth Century this new attitude is clearly recognisable throughout Europe, resulting in what we call the commercial and financial revolutions. Then in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries there occurred a series of physical accidents—such as the finding of new supplies of precious metals, the increasing hazards of the old overland trade routes, the more general use of the compass, the opening up of water-routes to the East with the consequent stimulation to trade—which greatly accelerated these revolutions. Commerce boomed; medieval financial morality was abandoned; modern banking methods came into use; the stock company was invented; the towns grew populous and the new middle class became rich and powerful; modern states arose and the first nationalistic wars were fought in the famous name of imperialism. All across Europe there was a stirring and a reinvigoration, for the instinct of cupidity was unhampered once again, and mankind gave thanks that it had outgrown those centuries of darkness during which feudalism and the Christian church had interfered somewhat with business.

We are in a position now to answer my question as to what was reborn at the time of the Renaissance. Three things came back into their own during these centuries: humanism, which at its best is the spirit of the Greek pagan world; individualism, which we know well to-day; and good business, with which also we are not unacquainted. Along with these came a new prosperity, a new nationalism, an increased opportunity for worldly self-betterment, and—as a result of the invention of printing—an increased opportunity for education. At the

¹ At the same time the temptation to overstep the restrictions grew stronger, as increased trade and increased security of property promoted business opportunities. It is impossible to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between these two sets of facts, because it cannot be proved which came first.

same time, there was considerable change in the nature of education; for the humanist was naturally more interested in Greek literature than in theology. It is a mistake to imagine that the Renaissance was more learned than the Middle Ages; I do not see how any period could properly call itself that. But the learning was of a new kind, and it was available for a larger number of people.

We can easily see why this age thought highly of itself. It was growing rich and powerful; it was learning new and striking things, both about the actual world around it, and about the imagined world of long before; it was using its mind in what seemed to it a daring and original fashion. All in all, life was probably a more exciting and tumultuous experience than it had been since the days of the great awakening in the Twelfth Century, and it is no wonder that the participators were well pleased. But whether we, in retrospect, share their pleasure will depend largely upon whether we are more deeply attracted by the spirit of Dante's *In la sua volontade é nostra pace*, or by that of Rabelais' *Fais ce que voudras*.

In turning to a discussion of the Reformation, which was the second movement of permanent importance to take place during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries, it is important to keep in mind the political aspects of the commercial revolution. For when the rich middle class became a powerful element in society, and especially when the subsequent discovery of the New World whetted Europe's appetite for the pleasures of imperialism, it became necessary—if business was to flourish—to develop a stronger form of government than the loose feudal states of the Middle Ages. The new governments must have power enough to keep good peace at home and to make good war abroad. The machinery for creating this type of state was at hand: all that was needed was for the new commercial men—who controlled money, the ultimate source of power—to lend their support to the king in his long struggle with the feudal nobility. This was done; and in this

way arose the new national monarchies.¹ In this way also there came about "the replacement of the medieval ideal of a united Christendom loosely bound together, serving God and man under the guidance of the spiritual power of the church, by the ideal of a group of independent, irresponsible, absolutely sovereign territorial states, the avowed sanction of whose acts is power."² However, there was still one organisation which interfered with the new nationalism, and hence with business, and which therefore became increasingly unpopular with the kings and with the middle class. This was the Catholic Church, international in its organisation, international in its language, and a most expensive institution to maintain. The Church had long held such an important place in the conscience and the imagination of Europe that no attempt to overthrow it in the interest of nationalism or of larger profits could have succeeded, had it not prepared the way for its own defeat by a temporary abandonment of all those qualities which had once earned it the world's regard. Venality, cupidity, political chicanery, spiritual atrophy, and a most inordinate lust after the pleasures and the beauties of the temporary world—these are the qualities which the Church displayed in the hour of her need, when the kings and the merchants were eager to attack her for her power and wealth. The crisis came when disgusted and upright churchmen, such as Luther, launched a moral attack; the politicians saw their chance to seize rich lands and to bolster up the new national states with new national churches, so the vestiges of Europe's

¹ In such a brief essay on the Renaissance, it is hard to avoid suggesting a great deal more self-consciousness and acknowledged purpose behind people's acts than in truth existed. I am trying to give an account of what happened, and at the same time to suggest some of the underlying reasons, but I do not mean to imply that these reasons were conscious intentions on the part of the main actors of the period.

² Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, 172. Mr. Randall points out, of course, that the medieval world never attained, in practice, to the noble ideal which he here ascribes to it. Such attainment was frustrated by the private wars which were the curse of feudalism, and by the handicap—which the Middle Ages shared with other periods—of having to deal with human beings.

unity were destroyed. Even in those countries which remained Catholic, the Church ceased to exert an internationalising influence. France had already won for herself the *Gallican liberties*, which gave her the political advantages of a national church without the break from Rome; and Spain, through a good part of the Sixteenth Century, might be said to have made the Papacy an adjunct of the Spanish crown.

It is hard to see how this somewhat sordid story of religious reorganisation gained for itself the name of Reformation, except on the theory that the Catholic Church had become so decadent that any change must be for the better. Of course, there were the beginnings of a genuinely moral reform, both inside the Catholic Church and among the new sects that had broken off from it; but it is extremely important to realise that this had little connection with the political Reformation. For the most part, the two movements did not even take place at the same time. The nationalisation and the looting of the Church, in northern Europe, happened in the Sixteenth Century. This revolt from Rome did not start, as I stated above, until after the moral reformers had called attention to the state of affairs within the Church. But once it did start, it happened very quickly; whereas the true moral reformation was a slow matter, beginning in the German states long before the political revolt from Rome, coming to a head in Catholic Europe between the time of the Council of Trent and Port Royal in France, and not making itself generally effective in England until the Seventeenth Century. The Sixteenth Century, in England, was on the whole a period of ecclesiastical politics masquerading under the name of ecclesiastical reform, and the Seventeenth Century was on the whole a period of more genuine moral reformation. The Puritans in England and the Jansenists of Port Royal in France are proof of the reality of this reform. The distinction between the two Reformations is very clear in literature. In the Sixteenth Century, we find Shakespeare and Mar-

lowe, both apparently as little affected by formal religion as it is possible for human beings to be; or else we find Spenser, in whose *Faërie Queene* there is much pother about wicked Catholics and noble Protestants, but little that could be called genuinely religious. In the Seventeenth Century we find Milton and Pascal.

There were really four different influences at work in all this tangled story. First of all, there was the political and financial situation, which predisposed men's minds to the idea of national churches. Secondly, there was humanism, which was unfriendly to the dualism underlying so much of medieval, and hence of Catholic, thought—the dualism which is the eternal enemy of the doctrine of the fullness of life. Thirdly, there was the rising tide of individualism, a spirit which is bound to destroy the unity of any church. It is the foe of authority and tradition, of ritual and formality, of faith and superstition. It is the prime centrifugal force. Already in the Seventeenth Century it was beginning to disintegrate the new Protestant churches, and we find a man like Milton constructing his own private and absolutely individual faith. In the modern world this spirit has grown so strong that we appear to be approaching the time when there will be as many Protestant churches as there are Protestants—the time, in other words, when there will be no Protestant church at all. Lastly, there was the honest and inevitable revolt against the accumulated spiritual degradation of a hundred and fifty years. Some time early in the Fourteenth Century, the vitality of medieval Catholicism began to wane. Already in Chaucer's time the process was well under way, and by the Sixteenth Century the Church was an unseemly and distressing spectacle. In fact, the story of the unreformed Church of those days is the only thing which can compare, for sordidness and hypocrisy, with the story of the political Reformation.

Since all four of these elements made directly or indirectly for the destruction of the Catholic Church, it is no wonder

that throughout much of Europe the Church was destroyed. But in tracing the story of this destruction in England, and especially in tracing the literary reflections of this story during both the Sixteenth and the Seventeenth centuries, it is necessary to keep these four elements distinguished. Lumped together, we can only say of them that they produced the Reformation and Puritanism; but in what way the same set of forces could produce two such incommensurable objects as Henry VIII and John Milton can only be understood if they are not lumped together, but kept very carefully separate in the mind.

2

After the death of Chaucer and the deposition of Richard II, England entered on a long period of literary and political decay. The political decay is easy enough to understand. After the Lancastrian usurpation in 1399, the ruling family in England had a poorer claim to the throne than had their cousins the Yorkists. As a result, the kings had to spend their time either in putting down domestic insurrections or else in distracting the attention of the country by means of military exploits abroad. Henry IV did the former, and Henry V the latter, but Henry VI was unable to do either. He was beaten abroad, and he could not keep peace at home; so in his reign there began the Wars of the Roses—a long-drawn-out and purely private conflict between the rival houses who claimed the throne of England. It is hard to say how much the lives of the ordinary citizens were deranged by this fighting between the personal armies of the great nobles. Certainly the large towns were little disturbed, and in general it appears to have been a war which any one could join who felt inclined, but which no one was pressed to enter. At any rate, it was the *reductio ad absurdum* of feudalism, and it must have been extremely irritating and inconvenient to the rising middle class. When at last the two factions had reduced one another to ap-

proximately the condition of the gingham dog and the calico cat, the House of Tudor was discovered to have as good a claim as any family with representatives who were still alive, and in 1485 that house began its ignobly glorious career. After the flamboyant Plantagenets, who could sometimes commit their enormities with a royal flourish, these meanly scheming Tudors were a sorry lot. They were industrious; they were—with the exception of Mary—good politicians; they were stupendously lucky; their joint reigns covered almost the whole period of the Renaissance and the Reformation in England; and without intending it they prepared the way for the English revolution of the Seventeenth Century. So no one can deny that the Tudors were important; but how any one can find them either pleasing or admirable, I do not see.

Under Henry VII, who ruled until 1509, there took place that coalition between the rising commercial class and the crown which was doing so much to create the new nationalism all over Europe. In England this was an unusually easy process, because the feudal nobility had not only discredited itself by the Wars of the Roses, but had also, to a great extent, killed itself off. This latter fact gave the king an opportunity to bestow the old titles on members of the new plutocracy, thus securing loyalty. Also under Henry VII, England became for the first time noticeably affected by the new humanism and individualism.

These two components of the Renaissance did not become a very general influence on English life or thought until the reign of Henry VIII, and they did not attain to anything like full growth on English soil until well into the second half of the century and the reign of Elizabeth. Under Henry VIII, however, the commercial and financial revolutions proceeded rapidly, and the alliance between the crown and the middle class continued unimpaired. It is largely because of the way in which they fostered this alliance that the Tudors were so successful as monarchs; and it is because of the power, and

the training in politics, which the middle class attained under the Tudors, that it was able to seize complete control of the government in the next century, under the Stuarts. It is true that under Henry VII the power of Parliament had seemed to be on the wane. The appearance was deceptive, however, because the middle class was growing steadily more important, so that Parliament, representing that class, would not long acquiesce in impotence. And under Henry VIII it was not asked to do any such thing, for Henry realised that he and Parliament were seeking the same ends—money, power, and a strong national state. If they worked together, they could attain all these things; if they were at odds, they might frustrate one another. So Henry saw to it that they worked together, and the result of his Reformation was, as Mr. Trevelyan says, to double the importance of Parliament.

Ever since the generation of Chaucer and Wycliffe there had been in England an organised protest against the abuses within the Church, against the indifference of the clergy to the religious needs of the common people, and against the power, the wealth, and the uselessness—as many people thought—of the monasteries. This Lollard movement seems to have been much less active in the time of Henry VIII than it had been during the previous century and a half. Nevertheless, the movement still existed. The Catholic Church had given the English kings splendid excuses for attacking it whenever they should have a more compelling motive than moral reform. That motive came when, for a combination of public and private reasons, Henry desired to have his first marriage annulled by the Pope in order that he might marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn, by whom he hoped to have a legitimate male heir.

It would have come with the freshness of a morning wind across the mountains, had the Pope, in that time-serving and hypocritical world, taken an unequivocally moral stand; but Clement VII was not the man to do anything so troublesome.

Henry's sister, Margaret, had recently secured a divorce pleasantly enough, and there is little reason to suppose that the Defender of the Faith would have been refused a similar accommodation, had it not been for the untoward circumstances that the wife from whom he desired freedom was a Spanish princess, and that for the time being her nephew, Charles V, owned Rome and everybody in it. So Henry was kept waiting: a predicament for which his life had not fitted him.

Henry was kept waiting; the monasteries of England were exceedingly rich; the new English nation was hampered by its association with a church which was taking its orders from Spain; the German princes had recently shown how easy and how profitable it was to reform a people. . . . So Henry acted.¹ With the co-operation of Parliament, the separation from Rome was accomplished, and the declaration of Henry's supreme headship. Then the monasteries were investigated, and found to be unsatisfactory. So they were suppressed, and their property was "secularised"; that is to say, it was sold by Henry—at a convenient figure—to the courtiers and merchants whom he wished to please. They, in turn, resold much of it; so before long the Reformation was protected by a most powerful vested interest. A return to Rome would have endangered the property of a large number of well-thought-of people—a situation which would put almost any policy into disrepute.

The story of the rest of the Reformation is simple, if unattractive. Henry's son, Edward VI, was a boy during the whole of his brief reign, and under his Protectors the Reformation proceeded to certain doctrinal and ceremonial changes and to the substitution of English for Latin in the church services. Also, people were encouraged to acquaint them-

¹ Again there is a suggestion in all this of more self-consciousness than I wish to imply. I believe that the motives which I here suggest were the underlying motives for Henry's conduct; but I do not believe that he faced them all and recognized them as such.

selves with the Bible in English. . . . When Edward died, he was succeeded by one of the most pathetic characters in history, Mary Tudor, who reigned from 1553 to 1558. Though a Tudor, Mary was markedly lacking in the usual Tudor quality of intelligence. She put England back into the Catholic Church, an act which she regarded as her simple duty. But though she was diplomatic enough not to interfere with the property of those who had benefited by the "great plunder," she nevertheless proceeded to justify all the fears of the nationalistic anti-Catholics by marrying Philip of Spain and then submitting England's foreign policy to his domination. If the choice lay between a Protestant and powerful England on the one hand, and a Catholic and weak England on the other, there was no question as to which side the rising commercial class would take. And it must always be remembered that during these decisive years of religious anarchy, the commercial and financial revolutions were proceeding apace. The English cloth trade was booming, and with it the English towns and the English merchant marine. And all the people involved in these lucrative employments depended for their prosperity upon a strong and internationally respected England.

So when Elizabeth (1558-1603) succeeded to the throne, and the question of the church for the English people had to be decided once again, there were two main questions to be considered: under which church would Elizabeth's position be stronger, and under which church would England be more likely to prosper? The answer to both questions seemed to be, "under the national church"; so the national church was chosen. Among other advantages, this church made it more practical for Elizabeth to pose as a legitimate child of Henry VIII; and Elizabeth's legitimacy, if established, weakened the claim to the English throne of Mary Queen of Scots.

A very significant point, for any one who wishes to understand this period, is the singular lack of interest which the

English people appear to have shown during all these changes. It is no wonder that the looting of the monasteries was not more generally resented; for the monasteries were great landlords, and the landlord is seldom a subject of popular esteem. But that the people should have been so unconcerned over whether they were to be called Catholic or Protestant, and whether they were to be spiritually subject to King or Pope, seems strange indeed. There were, of course, some protests. Under Henry VIII, there was a rising in the northern counties known as the Pilgrimage of Grace—a rising which might have amounted to something, had it found proper leadership. But the fact remains that it did not amount to anything, and that on the whole the English people took their religion exactly as it was prescribed to them.¹ This can mean only one thing—that in the days of the Tudors the English were very little interested in religion. The Catholic Church had ceased to inspire any deep loyalty among the common people. They may have been glad or sorry, as they were ordered to leave it, and to return to it, and to leave it again. But they were certainly not *very* glad, or *very* sorry; else they would have made themselves heard upon the subject. Shakespeare gives a many-sided picture of the England of his day, and he has even been called—erroneously, I think—the perfect mirror of Elizabethan England. Yet from a reading of Shakespeare one would never learn that there was anything taking place in the religious world. As a matter of fact, very little *was* taking place. It was in the world of politics that all the changes happened, and meanwhile the spirit of religion slumbered. Not until the next century did it awake; and then it made itself heard unmistakably. The Seventeenth Century kings of England found it a thankless task to tell their people what, or how, to worship.

To return to Elizabeth's reign: Aside from the story of

¹ There were a few martyrs, of course, for both causes; but the notable thing, in view of the importance of the issue, is how few there were.

the Reformation, her reign marks the culmination, in England, of all the characteristic forces of these two centuries discussed earlier in the chapter. Humanism, individualism, nationalism, growing prosperity, growing commerce, imperialistic wars, the spread of education, the increase in opportunity for a talented individual to win his way upward in the world: all these things were present in Elizabeth's reign, and taken together they created the vital, almost ecstatic atmosphere of those days. Again, it is very easy to see why the participators enjoyed themselves; but again I question the true value of that civilisation. It was a period when the maximum of sensation was experienced by all. But to what extent was it a period of real beauty, or profundity, or worth? The question can best be answered by a consideration of its poetry.

3

I said above that the period following the death of Chaucer was an age of poetic stagnation. The stagnation lasted for about a hundred and fifty years.¹ There have been many explanations of this dearth, none of them entirely satisfactory. It was a period of transition, rather than of fulfilment; but so was the Nineteenth Century. It was a period of warfare and extreme disturbance; but so was the Seventeenth Century.² Lastly, it was a period when the spiritual life of England was at a low ebb. The Middle Ages seemed to be exhausted, and the galvanic effects of the Renaissance had not yet made themselves felt. This factor is probably the most important one in explaining the decline of poetry written for the educated classes. It also suggests the reason why no simi-

¹ There was a vast quantity of poetry written during this hundred and fifty years, for the gradual increase of leisure and education on the part of the middle class seems to have created a public for even the most deplorable verse. The notable thing is that in spite of all the productivity its quality should—aside from the ballads—be so uniformly poor.

² In this connection, it is worth remarking that the most enduring poems of the Fifteenth Century are the border ballads, which were composed in a district where disturbance was extreme and almost continual.

lar decline took place in popular ballad literature—for the Fifteenth Century seems to have been even more prolific in ballads than the Fourteenth. The country people were naturally less affected by the changing times than were the prosperous city-dwellers. Medieval life and faith and spirit still had vitality upon the marches of Scotland long after they were fading in London and the coast towns. And so the Fifteenth Century ballads belong to the story of medieval poetry.

It is the dearth of second-rate poetry during this period between Chaucer and the middle of the Sixteenth Century which calls for comment. There was plenty of inferior material; and there is never reason to expect first-rate poetry of any age. A Dante or a Shakespeare—there is reason for surprise when they appear, but not when they are absent. It is the second-rate poets who are to be expected of any age, poets whose attainments are at least comparable to those of Marie de France, of Gower, of Sidney, of Herrick or Jonson, of Gray, of Byron. Why were there no poets of even this standing in the Fifteenth Century—for surely neither Lydgate, nor Occleve, nor James I of Scotland would rank so high? The answer seems to be that it is exactly the poet of this order who needs the support of a tradition, or of a moderately successful civilisation, to uphold him. Shakespeare would of course have been articulate in the Fifteenth Century, though his greatness might have been somewhat impaired; and any number of trivial rhymers *were* articulate. But the man who, in another age, might have reproduced in poetry of enduring beauty some of the significant elements in the spiritual life of his day—such a man is silenced by an age whose spiritual life is unusually weak and poor. He can not build such a life for himself, out of his own resources, and he does not find assistance in the world around him; so he is powerless. Probably more than one Fifteenth Century writer, out of the scores whose works have come down to us but who are quite forgotten, could have risen at least into the class of

permanently interesting poets, if they had been afforded the external assistance with which almost any other century since the Twelfth would have provided them.

Whatever the explanation, however, the fact remains that throughout this long stretch of time no poet whose works have any but a purely historical interest made an appearance. In fact, it was not until a full generation after 1550, it was not until Elizabeth had been on the throne for thirty years and until the Elizabethan age in politics was almost over, that English poetry became again important and the Elizabethan Age in poetry began. Tardiness in the poetic rendering of the new spirit is what normally occurs—perhaps because a poet expresses in maturity the forces which most deeply affected him during his youth. At any rate, Elizabethan England found poetic expression only during the last days of Elizabeth's long reign, and found some of its most characteristic and notable expression in the years following Elizabeth's death. Similarly, as I have mentioned before, Dante's poem, written early in the Fourteenth Century, is the expression not of that declining age but of the Thirteenth Century at its height. And Milton's rendering of the mood of 1640 was accomplished twenty-five years later, among the tinsel distractions of the Restoration. And Byron's anarchic revolutionary romanticism came during the Tory reaction in England and the Bourbon restoration in France, twenty years after the high spirit of the French Revolution had declined. This is a point worth emphasising, because it shows that poetry—like the other arts—is not prophetic in the sense of revealing the spirit of the immediate future, but rather in the sense of explaining what already exists.

I asked the question, some pages back, to what extent was this Elizabethan period an age of real beauty, profundity, and worth? It is clear from the story of the Reformation that the age was none of these things in its formal religious manifestations. And since the whole unsavoury religious question

was inextricably bound up with political affairs, it is safe to assume that such qualities will never be found in Elizabethan politics either, in spite of the glory and the prosperity with which those politics were crowned. So if beauty and worth are to be discovered anywhere, it will be in the expressions of humanism and individualism—in the expressions, that is, of the purely Renaissance spirit. How does this spirit reveal itself in poetry?

In Marlowe we find one very characteristic aspect of the Renaissance, namely, the yearning after limitless experience, limitless knowledge and power. The Middle Ages, at their best, had chosen one form of perfection, and in following after that they were content to sacrifice the rest. But the heroes of Marlowe are not so humble. As represented by Tamburlaine, they want all physical power; and as represented by Faustus, they want power over the metaphysical world as well.

I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,
And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about:
And sooner shall the sun fall from his sphere
Than Tamburlaine be slain or overcome.

And again:

A god is not so glorious as a king.
I think the pleasure they enjoy in Heaven
Cannot compare with kingly joys on earth,—
To wear a crown encased with pearl and gold,
Whose virtues carry with it life and death;
To ask and have, command and be obeyed.

Along with this lust for power goes its usual accompaniment, the lust for fame, for notoriety, no matter how attained.

Is it not passing brave to be a king,
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

And most striking of all, perhaps:

Millions of souls sit on the banks of Styx
Waiting the back return of Charon's boat;
Hell and Elysium swarm with ghosts of men,
That I have sent from sundry foughten fields,
To spread my fame through hell and up to Heaven.

In Faustus we find the same craving for power and completeness carried beyond the physical realm. Faustus is not satisfied with "the pomp of proud audacious deeds."

All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command: emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man,
A sound magician is a mighty God.

Faustus finds philosophy "odious and obscure," and divinity "unpleasant and harsh." "'Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me." In this play, Marlowe seems almost to be writing a parable on his age; for were not most of the Elizabethans ravished by magic, the magic of wealth, of fame, but above all of power? If magic ruined Dr. Faustus, did it not ruin Sir Walter Raleigh likewise, and the great Lord Verulam?

In Marlowe, then, we find humanism and individualism exhibited at their most primitive, material level. In these plays the fullness of life means "to ask and have, command and be obeyed"; while individualism is skin-deep, amounting to little more than ruthlessness and the unhampered exercise of power.¹ To experience all things physically, and to be

¹ The superficial, external quality of this individualism is characteristic of the Renaissance. Such men as Cellini, Raleigh, Marlowe, suggest characters in a play; they scarcely seem to have any inner life—especially if compared to a profound and self-conscious individualist like Milton.

strong enough to do anything that comes into your head: that is one interpretation of the Renaissance ideal. But the same ideal can lead a different type of man to seek the fullness of life in the greatest diversity of intellectual and spiritual experiences. For such a man, individualism will mean the possession of a mind which is never closed to any new and pleasing fancy or suggestion, an eclectic, Alexandrian mind, which may have a standpoint of its own, perhaps, but which is not willing to admit that any charming and noteworthy point of view must be discarded as running counter to its own beliefs. Such a mind is often found in the modern world, trying to reconcile with one another the various objects of its infatuation, struggling to construct a system which will combine the best elements of them all—so that it may simultaneously enjoy Platonism and Christianity and Taoism and the mathematical philosophy of Mr. Bertrand Russell. Such a mind has never the strength or clarity to say, "Here stand I!"

It is this aspect of Renaissance many-sidedness which Spenser illustrates. His eager but not very profound spirit borrowed enthusiastically from the Greeks and the Romans, from the Middle Ages, from the Italian Renaissance, and from the Protestant reformers of his own day. As a result, his *Faërie Queene* is a colossal mosaic, in which an industrious student may find pieces pilfered from almost every major production of the European mind. The central character of the poem, Arthur, is constructed around an Aristotelian conception; the picture of Holiness—and hence the entire meaning of the story of the Red Cross Knight, and of the character of Una—is compounded of Platonism plus the Neo-Platonism of the Platonic Academy at Florence; the physical trappings of the action are borrowed from the Catholic Middle Ages, in spite of the fact that the underlying meaning of the poem is that Catholicism is false, corrupt, and dangerous, whereas Protestantism is the saviour of England; and finally, for incidents and all manner of minor details, there is an indebtedness to

Vergil, Lucretius, Ariosto, and a truly portentous list of others.¹ It is not surprising that few people read *The Faërie Queene* as a whole; for it is not a whole, in any comprehensible sense. It is a treasure-house of beautiful and ingenious detail; but it has the same disorganising quality as a private collection of *objets d'art*, a collection in which the taste of a single person is observable throughout, but which, taken as a whole, is bound to be meaningless, since it comprises so many meanings. Spenser is usually called a superb artist, but that seems to me a narrow and insignificant use of the word. I should prefer to call him a superb decorator. He can take an idea, and embellish it charmingly; he can take a scene, and picture it beautifully; he is melodious, and smooth, and lovely; he could contrive an apparently endless series of diverting incidents; at times he could even give memorable expression to a generalised, conventional point of view:

So passeth, in the passing of a day,
Of mortall life the leafe, the bud, the floure;
Ne more doth florish after first decay,
That earst was sought to deck both bed and boure
Of many a lady, and many a Paramoure.
Gather therefore the Rose whilest yet is prime,
For soone comes age that will her pride defloure;
Gather the Rose of love whilest yet is time,
Whilest loving thou mayest loved be with equall crime.

Or again:

Is not his lawe, Let every sinner die;
Die shall all flesh? What then must needs be donne,
Is it not better to do willinglie,
Then linger till the glas be all out ronne?
Death is the end of woes: die soone, O faëries sonne!

¹ I am not, of course, accusing Spenser of plagiarism. My criticism is merely that Spenser failed to make something new and organic out of the suggestions which he gathered here and there, and which it was his privilege to gather if he chose.

However, in spite of all these gifts, Spenser lacked the essential power of a very great artist: he could not organise his heterogeneous material into a meaningful whole. He could beautify whatever he touched, but only with the superficial beauty of sound and movement. When Spenser describes a scene, he gives an ornate and elaborate picture thereof. The one thing he does not give is the essence, the true inwardness, of his object. For example:

There the most daintie Paradise on ground
It selfe doth offer to his sober eye,
In which all pleasures plenteously abound,
And none doth others happiness envye;
The painted floures, the trees upshooting hye,
The dales for shade, the hilles for breathing space,
The trembling groves, the christall running by,
And, that which all faire workes doth most aggrace,
The art which all that wrought appeared in no place.

That, it seems to me, is the method of the decorator. A wealth of attractive details is presented, but the thing does not come together as a whole. The truly great artist might, or might not, use the details; but he would assuredly reveal the essential nature of whatever he was describing:

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

Or,

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Such description not only describes, it explains. Something in the nature and the meaning of morning, or of a tree in winter, has passed into Shakespeare's lines. But Spenser's descriptions have no such significance.

I have laboured this point, because it seems to me important for an understanding of the Renaissance. The limita-

tions of Tamburlaine and of Faustus on the one side, and of Spenser on the other, are the almost necessary limitations of him who follows after the humanistic ideal. A man may, with good fortune, make some progress towards a single and clearly defined goal; but in order to do that he will have to turn his back on all other possible goals. If, on the other hand, he decides that he will be many different things, and that life is too rich and pleasant to sacrifice any parts of it to any other part, he may attain greatness and renown, but he will be most unlikely to achieve supreme rank anywhere.¹ This is the weakness of humanism. It did not endure, as a primary motive in men's lives; it did not become—as was at first anticipated—a substitute for the religion of the Middle Ages. And the reason is that humanism leads nowhere, and has no deep abiding meaning. It is—in the light of eternity—an essentially trivial ideal.

What, then, of Shakespeare? One of the world's few supreme poets, he was born and bred in Elizabethan England. Why did he not share the shortcomings of his age? The answer is at least partly to be found in the fact that Shakespeare, though a true product of his period, was not a product of what is usually thought of as Elizabethan England, i.e., Elizabethan London. This point seems to me of great importance; and since it is frequently disregarded, I shall illustrate it in some detail.

In the first place, Shakespeare was not a humanist. He did not seek the fullness of life on the intellectual side, like Spenser. There was nothing Alexandrian about Shakespeare's intellectual range. He had a good school education, and that is all. His genius is emphatically not that of the conventional "literary" type. And this is probably very fortunate; for, as Mr. Tucker Brooke remarks, "had Shakespeare been well-bred and college trained . . . he would have been more pre-

¹ I am not convinced that even Leonardo da Vinci is an exception to this statement.

cocious and more clever. In all human probability he would have been very much less wise.”¹ Also, Shakespeare did not seek the fullness of life in the way of many-sided activity. His career was the theatre, first and last, and from that career he never turned aside. He was an actor, a dramatist, and a manager; but he took little interest in politics, or warfare, or overseas adventuring. The importance of this will be clear to any one who compares Shakespeare’s concentrated activities with those of Sir Walter Raleigh, who was truly typical of the new Elizabethan Englishman.

In the second place, Shakespeare’s attitude towards politics and patriotism was not that of the new London, but rather that of the old countryside. To quote from Mr. Brooke:

The author of the Shakespearean plays, we can say with perfect confidence, was not the advanced political thinker that Bacon was, or Raleigh, or Spenser, or even Marlowe. He was distinctly a traditionalist in politics and social theory. His attitude towards the state and sovereign was not Tudor, but Plantagenet; not renaissance, but feudal. It represented the feeling of Stratford much better than that of London. . . . There is more zeal for national expansion and contemporary foreign policy in the one play of “Edward III” (I think, by Peele) than in all that Shakespeare wrote. . . . Perhaps it is not altogether an accident that in Shakespeare’s biography the careless continuators of the old feudal England—Southampton and Essex and Pembroke—mean a great deal, and the purveyors of the new political faith—Burghley, Raleigh, and Walsingham—mean nothing.

Some illustrations of these points may make them clearer. Just at the time when England was learning to look upon the sea as the means to empire and greatness, just when Spain’s control of the ocean pathways had been broken, and when Raleigh was planning his new England in the western continent, Shakespeare wrote about his country as

¹ In all that I have to say about Shakespeare a product of rural England, and hence not a typical “Elizabethan,” I am drawing upon Mr. Tucker Brooke’s *Shakespeare of Stratford*.

This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands.

Shakespeare, in other words, was a little Englander, for whom the sea was as a wall, or a moat, and not as a highroad leading to the conquest of half the world. "England bound in with the triumphant sea." Again, in the patriotic outburst at the end of "King John," it is England strong and able to defend herself against the world, not England strong and able to impose herself upon the world, which Shakespeare praises.

This England never did, nor never shall,
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.
Now these her princes are come home again,
Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them. Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself do rest but true.

This is Plantagenet patriotism. . . . Yet another illustration of Shakespeare the Stratford man, rather than the Londoner, is his interest in country types, and the marked scarcity, in his plays, of pictures of typical city-denzens. In this he is a notable contrast to such contemporaries as Dekker and Jonson.

We have seen that in regard to humanism, and also in regard to politics, Shakespeare is not a characteristic product of the new forces in England. He was probably much closer to the majority of Englishmen in his day than was a Londoner of the Raleigh type; but he was not what we regard as "Elizabethan." Where, then, did Shakespeare stand in regard to the other two dominant characteristics of the new forces in the Sixteenth Century; namely, individualism, and the begin-

nings of a moral reaction against the degradation of religion? These questions are much more difficult to answer. In regard to individualism, it is obvious that Shakespeare's was the type of mind which is "forever voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone." But whether it was a mind which instinctively rejected authority, there is no way of telling. At any rate, it was a mind too sensitive and too far-seeing to make any parade of such rejection. But Shakespeare's philosophy can not be discussed, because we know nothing about it. And the same, for the most part, is true of his religion, although here it is possible to draw conclusions from the absence of certain qualities. It is clear, for instance, that Shakespeare was not affected by the Reformation after the fashion of a more ordinary man like Spenser. Spenser is full of rancour and recrimination; but there is nothing in Shakespeare's works which would suggest that in the religious world bitterness and hatred ruled the day. Further, from the reading of Shakespeare, no one would ever learn that such a thing as Protestantism existed on earth. When Shakespeare uses the terminology of organised religion, he uses the old Catholic terminology. Priests and friars, the mass and vespers, these terms—which his simplest country neighbours would understand—occur frequently; but the new-fangled terms of Protestantism do not appear.¹

But the most notable thing of all is how very little formal religion counts in any of Shakespeare's works. Since many of the characters whom Shakespeare portrays are Christians, there are naturally references to Christianity throughout the plays. But there is nothing essentially Christian about the characterisations, or the philosophy, or the theme—where such exists—of any play. In fact, aside from the topical references, there is little to suggest that the author of these

¹ Needless to say, this is not because Shakespeare is securing local colour for the periods about which he wrote. Local colour is something with which Shakespeare never concerned himself.

plays lived in a Christian country. This fact is so strikingly clear that it has led Mr. Santayana to conclude, "Shakespeare is remarkable among the greater poets for being without a philosophy and without a religion. . . . He chose to leave his heroes and himself in the presence of life and of death with no other philosophy than that which the profane world can suggest and understand." This seems to me an exaggeration; but to argue the point would be to argue the meaning of the word religion, which is perhaps futile. At any rate, it is clear that Shakespeare had no formal religion which exercised any true influence upon his thought or feeling; though I believe that this statement should be qualified by adding that Shakespeare had to a high degree the spirituality which seems to me the essence of religion: the capacity for seizing upon and understanding the true inwardness of a character, an event, a situation, or an aspect of external nature. Mr. Santayana asserts that the cosmos eluded Shakespeare. This I do not believe. Shakespeare's cosmos eludes us; but I feel the presence of it through all his greater poetry.

Shakespeare always convinces me that he understands the life about which he writes. And it is not possible to understand life in little snatches, any more than to understand parts of a sonnet. If the thing is not grasped as a whole, it is not grasped at all. But if Shakespeare grasped life as a whole, and found meaning in it, he was a poet of prophecy, which is the same thing as a religious poet. The central question, then, is whether Shakespeare found life meaningful. Critics hesitate to claim that he did this, because they are unable to describe the meaning which he found. But it is natural that such should be the case, for Shakespeare lived in a society wherein the old and commonly accepted meanings of things were losing much of their appeal, so that if he wished to be specific about his beliefs he would have to turn aside from his dramatic purposes and make his plays vehicles for propaganda. That he did not do this is very fortunate, and is at

least as likely to have resulted from calm assurance in his views as from indifference and nihilism. But for me the surest proof that Shakespeare's cosmos had meaning comes from a comparison of his plays with the work of a poet for whom life is truly meaningless. Shakespeare's epic-drama, "Antony and Cleopatra," and Hardy's epic-drama, "The Dynasts,"¹ will serve for this purpose. Both tragedies are acted against the background of empire and dynastic war; but the former play leaves the reader in the mood produced by noble art, whereas the later play leaves him hyper-conscious of the trivial ignominy attendant upon life. In "Antony and Cleopatra," high and dangerous passions play themselves through to their inevitable but not ignoble pain; in "The Dynasts," an irresponsible Destiny wafts puppets through unmeaning coils of misery: such is the difference between a world of moral value and a world of chance. . . . Yet it is futile to ask of Shakespeare's plays that they specify his values:

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask: Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge.

If, then, we sum up the traditional qualities of Elizabethan England which are not to be found in Shakespeare's works, the list is an impressive one: humanism in either of its most characteristic forms, Protestantism, indignation against the Catholic Church, the new imperialistic nationalism, lively interest in the new world across the seas. There is left him, as an Elizabethan, only the ceaseless probing of his untraditional and uncommitted mind, and his freedom from any apparent debt to medieval Catholicism. As Mr. Brooke puts it:

In Shakespeare's actual life he ignored the dreams of El Dorado and imperial England, and he ignored the facts of tobacco and the colonization of Virginia and the fight of the *Revenge*, while scrutinizing day by day the thinking minds of the men and women about him. And

¹ Discussed in detail in Part Three, Chapter One.

thereby he gained a wisdom so deep that it concealed his plentiful lack of knowledge—a humanity so immense that we seldom note how completely he had failed to be Elizabethan.

This point is of importance, because if Shakespeare was—as is often supposed—the product and the exponent of Renaissance humanism, then humanism would become a more valuable episode in the story of European civilisation than I am inclined to consider it. That humanism is important, is obvious enough. But that humanism, as a motivating force, is capable of rising higher than the unprofitable many-sidedness of Faustus or of Spenser, I do not believe. The keynote of Shakespeare's mind and art, on the other hand, is wisdom, a deep abiding wisdom that passeth understanding, and that in more ways than one is related to peace. Such wisdom is almost the antithesis of the far-flung knowledge of humanism. Shakespeare knew comparatively little, compared to his great contemporaries; but he understood more than any one else who has expressed himself in English. His wisdom is a gift from heaven, not the result of living in any particular age; yet it is probable that Shakespeare profited exceedingly from being born when, and where, he was. He avoided the pitfalls of the Renaissance in England—the intellectual lusts and the political-religious passions of London—but he profited by the individualism with which men's minds were astir and by the exaggeration which seemed to be characteristic of human nature in those days. He saw huge passions displayed all about him, and enormous crimes and limitless ambitions. Could even his mind have conceived a Lear, a Lady Macbeth, an Antony, an Iago, in more tranquil and degenerate times?

Chapter Four

A LOUD UP-LIFTED ANGEL TRUMPET

And to our high-rai's'd phantasie present
That undisturbed Song of pure content,
Ay sung before the saphire-colour'd throne
To him that sits thereon. . . .
Where the bright Seraphim in burning row
Their loud up-lifted Angel trumpets blow.

I

Whether the Renaissance is truly pictured in the preceding chapter, or whether it has some high value which I do not perceive, at any rate there can be little doubt that as a primary motive in European civilisation the Renaissance was notably short-lived. By the middle of the Seventeenth Century it was not, anywhere, a dominating force. Science, religion, political theories—it was for such causes as these that the men of 1650 harassed themselves, or one another.

It makes little difference whether we regard the Renaissance as primarily the end of the Middle Ages, or as a glamorous, if unproductive, interregnum between the old age and the new; in either case it remains clear that the Seventeenth Century marks the birth of the modern world. We have seen elements of modernity—such as the financial and commercial revolutions—as far back as the Wars of the Roses, but such elements are not numerous and powerful enough to set the tone until well into the Seventeenth Century. When that momentous hundred years began, Queen Elizabeth was still on the throne of England and Shakespeare had not yet written the most famous of his plays; when they were over, England had endured two revolutions; political power had passed officially into the hands of the rich; Puritanism had known its

brief triumph and its failure; the disruptive effects of Protestantism upon organised religion were showing themselves in the multiplication of sects—some of them astonishingly heretical sects, like the Socinians; and the Cartesian and Newtonian revolution in science was accomplished. It is this latter which makes the Seventeenth Century the parent of the modern world, for the new science, with its children, the industrial revolution and political democracy, has re-created man's life, and is responsible, directly or indirectly, for most of what is distinctively modern in the world to-day. By considering only the more agreeable aspects of modernity, it is possible to paint science as a godsend; by considering only the repulsive aspects, it is possible to paint it as an affliction. But in either case, it is not science which is being judged, but rather the world which, with science as a tool, man has constructed. It was the Seventeenth Century—the century of Galileo, of Descartes, of Newton—which forged this tool; the succeeding generations have busied themselves by applying it to all things, and have thus learned, in a slow and painful manner, some of the fields where it can profitably be used, and some of the fields where it is valueless or harmful. This aspect of the story of science—the attempt to apply the new method to all of life, the failure of that attempt, and the consequent reorganisation of scientific aims—is fundamental to an understanding of the modern world; but it is discussed in the next chapter rather than in this, because it was during the Eighteenth Century that the more important stages in the process took place.

Aside from the scientific revolution, the most important movement in English Seventeenth Century affairs was that which Milton represents both in his life and in his poetry, namely, the religious and political upheavals which are associated with the name of Puritanism. Milton's life was so much bound up with this movement, and his poetry was so much influenced thereby, that it is necessary to have the main

historical facts in mind before attempting to understand or criticise Milton.

Puritanism first became a force in England after the death of Mary Tudor. During her reign a number of Protestant exiles had taken refuge in Switzerland; but as soon as Elizabeth succeeded to the throne, they returned home, bringing with them a new and radical conception of Protestantism. At first, the Puritans were not numerically strong, but they were always clamorous and determined, partly because they knew exactly what they wanted, and partly because, unlike their opponents, they were not distracted by questions of politics or of mundane expediency. In the time of Elizabeth, the chief practical question at issue between Puritans and Anglicans was the question of the episcopacy. By the year 1593, the bishops had taken their stand upon divine right and apostolic succession, which involved the idea that though no longer united with Rome they were nevertheless descended from the primitive church. The Puritans replied that descent from the primitive Church was a handicap rather than a virtue, that no such institution as episcopacy was provided for in the Bible, and that, as a matter of historical fact, bishops had always been a great nuisance. So the quarrel stood when in 1603 Elizabeth died, and James I, the first Stuart king, came to the throne.

From the beginning, Puritanism had spread chiefly among the middle class. In fact, from one point of view it might be called the religion of the business man, for like all the offshoots of Calvinism it exalted diligence and sobriety and thrift, and hence—when interpreted by an unspiritual mind—it was as much opposed to the monastic, ascetic, otherworldly tendency in the Catholic Middle Ages as was Italian humanism. Humanism was diffuse, and desired fullness of experience; Puritanism was concentrated, and desired Godliness and efficiency. Humanism was inclined to welcome the many pleasures of this world; Puritanism was inclined to suppress them,

as leading neither to success in this life nor to the greater glory of God in heaven. But in spite of such deep and important differences, these two movements, at least as understood by the rank and file of their followers, shared a distaste for the unpractical otherworldliness of the New Testament. . . . So Puritanism came more and more, in England, to be the religion of the middle class. And Parliament, or rather the House of Commons, was the political representative of the middle class. Therefore, when the Stuart kings not only supported the bishops against the Puritans, but asserted their own divine right to govern absolutely, without any interference on the part of Parliament, they contrived to unite the political and religious questions, and hence to solidify, and to dignify, the political opposition as nothing else could have done. From this time on, until the success and subsequent failure of the Puritan revolution, politics and religion are inextricable, as they are inextricable throughout Milton's life and thought. When the revolution finally came, liberty—that is, the right of the middle class to govern England in their own interest, instead of submitting to an autocratic monarch—was identified in men's minds with opposition to bishops, and even a stained glass window had become symbolic of the divine right of kings.

The story of the Revolution, of Cromwell's dictatorship, and of the Restoration, is probably more generally known than any other period in English history, and I shall not recount it here. But before turning to a consideration of Milton and his poetry, I must try to find some clear statement of the meaning of the word Puritan, a word that has been so much bandied about of late that it has ceased to have any meaning at all. But it did have a meaning, or several meanings, in the Seventeenth Century, and it is these I wish to recapture.

First of all, and in the most general sense, a Puritan was a man who adopted the extreme point of view of German

or Swiss Protestantism, instead of the compromise position of the Church of England. The Puritan regarded the Reformation as a great moral change, and he felt that in the Church of England the genuine reforming tendencies had been tempered by political expediency, and that as a result of this political taint the Church of England was destined to become more and more the tool of absolutism and reaction, less and less a true expression of Protestant religious zeal. The Puritan, in this first sense of the word, represents Protestantism at its best: austere, in that it regarded moral worth as the source of value; stern, in that it was convinced of its own righteousness; but by no means to be identified with the rancorous distaste for any form of pleasure with which it is so often associated. In this meaning of the word, such men as Colonel Hutchinson and Milton were Puritans, although they represent the breadth of culture and of worldly attainment which is characteristic of humanism.

In a more specific sense, the Puritan in 1642 was a member of the Presbyterian group in Parliament. This group wished to establish Presbyterianism as the state religion in England, and to curtail the power of the crown. Once it had done this, it was willing to make peace with the King, and it would then proceed to govern England after its own fashion and to persecute all dissent from Presbyterianism. In this sense of the word, Milton was not a Puritan. In fact, he was the exact opposite; he was a violent and contumacious foe of this type of Puritanism. For Milton, except during a very brief period, was not a Presbyterian. After 1645 or 1650, he was not an orthodox Christian of any sort. He was what, in those days, was known as an Independent—that is, a man whose religion bore some resemblance to Calvinistic Protestantism and who was opposed to bishops on both religious and political grounds. For the rest, the Independents held the most diverse and individual heresies, and since they frequently found themselves in a minority of one, they united in

demanding some form of toleration. Many of them demanded toleration of any conceivable point of view, like the soldier quoted by Mr. Cheyney, who said, "If I should worship the sun or the moon, like the Persians, or the pewter pot on the table, nobody has anything to do with it." Milton himself goes almost that far in his pamphlet entitled *Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes, Showing That It Is Not Lawful for Any Power on Earth to Compel in Matters of Religion*, (1659): "How many persecutions, then, imprisonments, banishments, penalties, and stripes; how much bloodshed have the forces of conscience to answer for, and protestants rather than papists!" Such views, expressed in the midst of that bitter and contentious Seventeenth Century, expressed only a few years after the close of the Thirty Years' War, such views show how little Milton was a Puritan in the narrow and partisan sense of the word.

But there is still a third meaning of "Puritan" in the Seventeenth Century; there is the Puritan of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*—the lugubrious and hypocritical fool who envies, and so hates, all things that are gay and glad. Allowing for exaggeration, it is probable that there were such people among the Seventeenth Century Puritans. The combination of sobriety and zeal which was expected of them would foster such qualities in many people; but there is no reason to believe that Puritans of this description formed a very important element in English public life during the Seventeenth Century. . . . At any rate, in this essay I shall use the word Puritan only in the first and most general of these three senses which I have defined. I shall use it to apply to that group who in religion were opposed to episcopacy and in politics were opposed to the pretensions of the king. I shall further subdivide the Puritans into the Presbyterians, who stood for religious intolerance and a limited monarchy, and the Independents, who came gradually to stand for religious tolerance and the abolition of the monarchy. In so far as

Milton may be classified, he is an Independent; but one of the important things to remember about Milton is that he is too much of an individualist to be taken as the representative of any group, however small.

2

Milton's grandfather was a Catholic, a stubborn and prideful Catholic who preferred to pay large fines from time to time rather than go through the form of submission to the Church of England. Milton's father became a Protestant, in spite of the fact that this caused him to be banished from home and disinherited. So it is little wonder that John Milton himself had a rebellious and intransigent disposition. Throughout his life he was the most extreme individualist, and this native quality was doubtless fostered by the way in which his family regarded him, from the time he was a boy, as one destined for greatness and possessed of genius. Milton grew up calmly assured that he had splendid and striking abilities, and calmly determined so to govern his life as to make the most valuable use of these powers. His self-confidence did not degenerate into smugness, for Milton, through all his discouraging career, was eager to ascribe to others the same capacities and the same moral enthusiasm which he found in himself. Throughout his political pamphlets, his programme for education, his treatises on divorce, and above all throughout his pleas for an almost anarchic freedom, there runs a quality of impracticality, due to his unwillingness to learn that other people, even his own friends and associates, were not as disinterested, as sincere, as trustworthy as himself.

When Milton went up to Cambridge, he planned to become a clergyman in the Church of England, but he changed his mind before taking his degree, because he found that a clergyman was too much bound by policies of church and state. He discovered, as he puts it himself, "that he who

would take orders must subscribe slave." Therefore, he continues, "I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing." This is the first time when Milton's determination not to be controlled or silenced by any power on earth makes itself evident. He did not yet, however, leave the Anglican church and ally himself with its enemies, the Puritans; he merely retired to the country and lived there quietly, on his father's money, from 1632 to 1638, studying, writing occasional short poems, and preparing himself to undertake the great religious poem which was to be the central work of his life. Then, in 1638, he began a leisurely tour of the Continent; but before long he was called home by events in England, for in 1639 the conflict between Parliament and Charles I, and the closely related conflict between the Puritans and the Church of England, reached a stage which was obviously a prelude to violence and to an attempting at settling the issue, one way or the other, by force. So in 1639 Milton, who was now thirty-one years of age, returned to England, settling in London where he earned money by taking pupils.

In 1640, the political-religious crisis arrived, and Milton identified himself at once with the Puritans. He did this because the Puritans seemed to him to be fighting for freedom: freedom from the bishops, whose undue control over church matters had kept Milton from becoming a clergyman, and freedom from an autocratic king—for during the last eleven years Charles I had made himself absolute.

In considering Milton, it is necessary to remember constantly that his belief in the necessity of liberty is one of the deepest and most ingrained parts of his nature. He believed that morality and the good life depend upon a state of liberty, just as he believed that liberty is impossible except to a person who is leading a just and noble life.

You, therefore [he writes], who wish to remain free, either instantly be wise, or, as soon as possible, cease to be fools; if you think slavery an intolerable evil, learn obedience to reason and the government of yourselves.

And again,

Unless you subject the propensity to avarice, to ambition, and sensuality, and expel all luxury from yourselves and from your families, you will find that you have cherished a more stubborn and intractable despot at home, than you ever encountered in the field. . . . For instead of fretting with vexation, or thinking that you can lay the blame on any one but yourselves, know that to be free is the same thing as to be pious, to be wise, to be temperate and just, to be frugal and abstinent, and lastly, to be magnanimous and brave; so to be the opposite of all these is the same as to be a slave; and it usually happens, by the appointment, and as it were retributive justice, of the Deity, that that people which cannot govern themselves, and moderate their passions, but crouch under the slavery of their lusts, should be delivered up to the sway of those whom they abhor, and made to submit to an involuntary servitude. . . . It is not agreeable to the nature of things that such persons ever should be free.

This is by no means a theoretical admiration of liberty, simply because it is a fine-sounding word or because it pleasantly suggests the great days of Greece or Rome. Milton was willing to put his faith in freedom to the test of practice, and devoted twenty years of his life to the earnest effort to obtain such a test. He believed in freedom of every sort—political, intellectual, moral—and he believed in freedom for other people, which is the heart of the matter.

It is true that Milton partially excluded Roman Catholicism from his many pleas for complete toleration; but he does this on the ground that Catholicism is not a religion so much as a political organisation for the furtherance of absolutism and intolerance:

Their religion the more considered, the less can be acknowledged a religion; but a Roman principality rather, endeavoring to keep up her

old universal dominion under a new name and mere shadow of a catholic religion.

In other words, in a country where Catholicism is allowed to flourish, toleration is impossible; therefore Catholicism must not be allowed to flourish. In this opinion as to the nature of the Catholic Church in the Seventeenth Century, Milton may have been entirely wrong, though it must be remembered that he had an opportunity of observing this church only in countries where it was supreme politically as well as in the religious field. He judged—wrongly, as we now know—that it would never be possible to separate the political power of the Catholic Church from the religious. Yet although this judgment was an error, it was not the crass and obvious violation of his own principles which it has sometimes been called.

In regard to political liberty, Milton says the following:

Then, since there are often in a republic men who have the same itch for making a multiplicity of laws, as some poetasters have for making many verses, and since laws are usually worse in proportion as they are more numerous, if you shall not enact so many new laws as you abolish old, which do not operate so much as warnings against evil, as impediments in the way of good; and if you shall retain only those which are necessary, which do not confound the distinctions of good and evil, which while they prevent the frauds of the wicked, do not prohibit the innocent freedoms of the good, which punish crimes, without interdicting those things which are lawful only on account of the abuses to which they may occasionally be exposed. For the intention of laws is to check the commission of vice; but liberty is the best school of virtue, and affords the strongest encouragements to the practice.

In regard to intellectual liberty, to liberty of opinion and expression, Milton first points out that truth is not something which can be discovered once for all and then put safely away in some book or institution:

Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.

He then adds that nothing is true for a man unless he has come to it by his own endeavour and has convinced himself of it:

A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his master says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy.

It follows from these two beliefs that men must be allowed to seek the truth, each after his own fashion, and that no government and no church should be permitted to interfere.

It follows [wrote Milton], that when an acquiescence in human opinion or an obedience to human authority in matters of religion is exacted, in the name either of the church or of the Christian magistrate, from those who are themselves led individually by the Spirit of God, this is in effect to impose a yoke, not on man, but on the Holy Spirit itself.

In one of his most eloquent passages, in the midst of an appeal to Parliament to abolish censorship, Milton declared:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who, as that story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, lords and commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming. . . . Suffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyred saint.

Finally, in the matter of religious liberty, Milton was again a complete individualist, believing that it was not only the

privilege but the moral obligation of each man to decide such matters for himself.

The rule of judgment will be the conscience of each individual, according to the measure of light which he has enjoyed.

Milton professed, when deciding religious matters, to follow the teaching of the Bible, but he did so with this liberal proviso:

. . . thus, even on the authority of Scripture itself, everything is to be finally referred to the Spirit and the unwritten word.

Needless to say, "the Spirit and the unwritten word" meant Milton's own private judgment and intuition. Holding such views as these, it is clear that Milton must disapprove of any organised and formal religion interpreted by priests and depending for its sanction upon authority.¹ It is the priestly office, in particular, of which he disapproves.

And this all Christians ought to know [he wrote in one of his early pamphlets], that the title of clergy Saint Peter gave to all God's people, till Pope Higinus and the succeeding prelates took it from them, appropriating that name to themselves and their priests only; and condemning the rest of God's inheritance to an injurious and alienate condition of laity.

This feeling about the imposition of authority was responsible for Milton's lifelong distaste for the Catholic Church; the same feeling drove him out of the Church of England because of his disapproval of episcopacy and of the control which the bishops exercised; later, it drove him out of the Presbyterian Church also, when he found that the Presbyterians sought to force their beliefs upon the rest of England; and Milton ended his days as a member of no church. He made an unique, and strangely interesting, and extremely

¹ It was not until about 1650 that Milton's views became as radical as this. Earlier in life, as we have seen, he was willing to belong to a church—though even then he chafed at its restrictions, refusing, for that reason, to become a clergyman.

heterodox, interpretation of the Bible for himself, and guided his life by that.¹

In connection with these questions of religious and civil liberty, it is interesting to observe that Milton was one of the few men of his day to see the necessity, if there is to be liberty at all, of separating ecclesiastical from civil power, church from state. When Salmasius attacked the English Commonwealth for receiving the riff-raff of every sect, Milton answered:

Why should they not? It belongs to the church to exclude them from the community of the faithful, not to the magistrates to expel them from the state, if they do not offend against the civil laws. Men at first united in civil society that they might live in safety and freedom, without suffering violence and wrong, in the church that they might live in religion and holiness. The one has its laws, and the other its discipline, which is utterly different. In the whole Christian world, for so many years, one war has followed another because the Magistrate and the Church have confused their functions.

As I stated above, the chief explanation of Milton's distaste for the Catholic Church was that it refused to make this distinction, but always wanted the magistrate to support the Church.

From this brief review of Milton's opinions, and practice, in regard to liberty, it is easy to see why, in 1640, he threw in his lot with the anti-episcopal, anti-autocratic, Puritan party. For the next twenty years, Milton was primarily a pamphleteer. He wrote on the political question, on the religious question, on education, on toleration, and on divorce; but underlying, and unifying, all this prose work is the single passion for freedom. It is a mistake to regard these twenty years as wasted, or as representing a side-issue in Milton's career. They are the centre and the meaning of his life, and

¹ He wrote a long account of this personal creed, under the title *De Doctrina Christiana*, and he considered this work one of his most important achievements. He could not publish this during his lifetime; and after his death it was lost, not coming to light until 1823. To any one who wishes to understand Milton's thought, the *De Doctrina* is an invaluable book.

the epics would never have been half so great had not Milton been a man who knew no choice but to throw himself into the world of action when it seemed for a time as if God's work could be more expeditiously forwarded in that way than in any other. When the time was passed, and it was clear that liberty—and the moral values which in Milton's mind were inseparable from liberty—were not yet to be attained on earth, Milton withdrew from action and took up again the poet's work, which he had always known he was better fitted to perform. He spoke of himself as writing with his left hand, when he wrote prose pamphlets; yet, when he thought that such pamphlets might be of service in the great work, he had to lend his aid to the limit of his capacities, whatever they might be. He gives an account of how he would have felt, had he abstained during this crisis, and gone on about his own private preferences. Always he would have heard a voice accusing him, after the fight had been lost in his absence:

Timorous and ungrateful, the church of God is now again at the foot of her insulting enemies, and thou bewailest. What matters it for thee, or thy bewailing? When time was, thou couldst not find a syllable of all thou hadst read, or studied, to utter in her behalf. Yet ease and leisure was given thee, for thy retired thoughts, out of the sweat of other men. . . . These, and such-like lessons as these, I know would have been my matins daily, and my even-song.

As M. Saurat says, "Milton's pamphlets must not be looked upon as literature, but as action. . . . It is fine and noble to sing the ways of God; it is finer and nobler to fulfil them." Looked at in this light, it is easy to see why Milton did not regret the sacrifice of twenty years, and of his eyesight, to the lost impossible cause of liberty. He had spent those twenty years in the way that seemed to him most worthy, and no man may hope for greater comfort than that, on earth. To the critics who complain that Milton should have given us more poetry and not so much dull prose, I repeat again that unless,

under the circumstances, the writing of the prose pamphlets had been an inevitable duty, the poetry, though more abundant, would have been far less valuable.

One other point should be borne in mind while considering Milton's prose period, and that is the influence which, in the Seventeenth Century, a pamphlet might have. Nowadays the talents of Milton would undoubtedly be wasted if devoted to political pamphleteering, because the public whom he would have to address, if he wished his work to be effective, would be the public which is unaccustomed to more complicated thinking than that induced by Mr. Arthur Brisbane. But in the England of the Puritan Revolution, if a man influenced a rather small number of educated men he might change the course of events. Also, people were more readily influenced by literature at that time than in the modern world. Mr. Geoffrey Scott has very clearly explained this fact:

The effective influence of literature depends on its prestige and its accessibility. The sparse and jealously guarded manuscripts of earlier days gave literature an almost magical prestige, but afforded no accessibility; the cheap diffusion of the printing press has made it accessible, but stripped it of its prestige. The interval between these two periods was literature's unprecedented and unrepeatable opportunity.¹

During the first five years of his dedication to the world of action, Milton was in a mood of hopefulness which, in retrospect, is pathetic. He wrote his pamphlets against the bishops (1641-1642), and then, as he explains:

When the bishops could no longer resist the multitude of their assailants, I had leisure to turn my thoughts to other subjects; to the promotion of real and substantial liberty; which is rather to be sought from within than from without; and whose existence depends, not so much on the terror of the sword, as on sobriety of conduct and integrity of life.

The tractate *Of Education*, the plea for toleration and no censorship, and the series of treatises in which he urges free

¹ Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*, 194.

divorce, are the works he had in mind when he spoke of "the promotion of real and substantial liberty." These pamphlets were written in the years 1643 to 1645, inclusive, a period during which Milton was filled with an almost ebullient hopefulness. The world's great age was about to begin anew. As Mr. Hales has pointed out,¹ Milton's mood suggests that of Wordsworth in the early days of the French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!

And when Milton's disillusion came, it was far more complete than Wordsworth's. For where Wordsworth was enthusiastic about the changes which the French Revolution seemed to promise, Milton was altogether identified with, and devoted to, the changes which he expected from the English Revolution.

His first suspicion that liberty was after all not to be forwarded by the Presbyterians seems to have come to him as a result of the reception of his divorce pamphlets. He was not surprised that people disagreed with him, but he was disgusted that they wished to prosecute and silence him. This interference with the privilege of free expression was, to Milton, the most outrageous of all violations of truth and liberty, and he wrote his *Areopagitica*, demanding, as he says,

that the power of determining what was true and what was false, what ought to be published and what ought to be suppressed, might no longer be trusted to a few illiterate and illiberal individuals, who refused their sanction to any work which contained views or sentiments at all above the level of the vulgar superstition.

But this plea, too, went unregarded, and Milton was soon forced to admit that his new friends, the Presbyterians, were little better than his old enemies, the bishops. "*New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ Large*," he wrote in 1647, in a sonnet *On the new force's of Conscience Under the Long PAR-*

¹ *Areopagitica* (Oxford, 1904), Introduction.

LIAMENT. Two years later he was Secretary for Foreign Tongues in Cromwell's Government, and hence a supporter of the Independent party. From this time on, Milton's pamphlets were chiefly expositions of the theory of government which would justify the Independents in executing King Charles, or else defences of that execution against public opinion and against attacks by foreign writers. Milton's desire was still the service of liberty, which, if it could once be brought to birth in England, would, he continued to believe, infallibly produce a religious and moral, as well as a political, reformation throughout that land. But, although the Independents were more true to their promises than the Presbyterians had been, and although some religious toleration and freedom of expression were now actually granted, Milton was no longer the sanguine and happy fighter that he had been nine years before. For one thing, he soon found that he was losing his sight in the service of Cromwell's government; for another thing, his private life continued harassing in the extreme;¹ but more discouraging than either of these abiding sorrows was the knowledge that Cromwell was forcing his reforms upon a reluctant people—the knowledge, therefore, that although the appearance of liberty might here or there be present, as in the toleration extended to most religious sects, the spirit itself remained unattainable.

So all that he had worked for was lost; yet he continued working for it beyond the eleventh hour.

In 1652, when a proposal was afoot for a new and rigorous propagation of the Gospel, Milton addressed the following sonnet *To the Lord Generall Cromwell*:

Cromwell, our cheif of men, who through a cloud
Not of warr onely, but detractions rude,
Guided by faith & matchless Fortitude
To peace & truth thy glorious way hast plough'd,

¹ Some years after the death of his first wife, with whom he had enjoyed little congeniality, he married again, and this time the relationship was successful. But his second wife died within a year.

And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
 Hast reard Gods Trophies, & his work pursu'd,
 While Darwen stream with blood of Scotts imbru'd,
 And *Dunbarr feild* resounds thy praises loud,
 And Worsters laureat wreath; yet much remains
 To conquer still; peace hath her victories
 No less renown'd then warr, new foes aries
 Threatning to bind our soules with secular chaines:
 Helpe us to save free Conscience from the paw
 Of hireling wolves whose Gospell is their maw.¹

In 1660, when Cromwell was dead, when the Restoration was clearly imminent, when—because of his support of the regicide—Milton's life was in danger, he published *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth, and the Excellencies Thereof, Compared with the Inconveniences and Dangers of Readmitting Kingship in This Nation*. At that time, all England knew that King Charles II would be home again in a few months, so even the title of this paper was a superb gesture of intransigence. If the idea of a free commonwealth had been worthy of praise in 1650, it remained worthy of praise in 1660—and who was King Charles, that fear of him should silence Milton? It is probable that now, when all was lost, it gave Milton pleasure to exhibit his indifference toward the power of his enemies; and although it was clear that no practical effect could be hoped from such a pamphlet at such a time, still it was a satisfaction to bear testimony once again, on the side of truth, before he was silenced by force. So the most notorious defender of the regicide greeted the new King with such words as these:

¹ Long afterwards, an echo of the disillusionment of these days found its way into the eleventh book of *Paradise Lost*:

I had hope

When violence was ceas't, and Warr on Earth,
 All would have then gon well, peace would have crownd
 With length of happy days the race of man;
 But I was farr deceav'd; for now I see
 Peace to corrupt no less then Warr to waste.

But if the people be so affected as to prostitute religion and liberty to the vain and groundless apprehension, that nothing but kingship can restore trade . . . and that therefore we must forego and set to sale religion, liberty, honour, safety, all concerns divine or human, to keep up trading: if, lastly, after all this light among us, the same reason shall pass for current, to put our necks again under kingship, as was made use of by the Jews to return back to Egypt, and to the worship of their idol Queen, because they falsely imagined that they then lived in more plenty and prosperity; our condition is not sound, but rotten, both in religion and all civil prudence; and will bring us soon, the way we are marching, to those calamities, which attend always and unavoidably on luxury, all national judgments under foreign and domestic slavery: so far we shall be from mending our condition by monarchizing our government, whatever new conceit now possesses us. . . . Thus much I should perhaps have said, though I was sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the prophet, "O earth, earth, earth!" to tell the very soil itself, what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to.

By the time these words were written, Milton was already at work upon *Paradise Lost*; the days of action were over. When the Restoration took place, Milton spent a few months in prison; then—in December, 1660—it was decided to pardon him, and he spent the remaining fourteen years of his life quietly at work upon his poetry.

It has been said of *Paradise Lost* that "disaster gave to the poem that vital and impassioned interest which makes of it more than a work of art, the ultimate question of man interrogating destiny." This, it seems to me, is exactly true. Because Milton had hoped so much and been so sorely disappointed, he was compelled to face the question of God's relation to man. What could be said of a world wherein all that seemed good was defeated, wherein consistently an immoral despotism triumphed? That was the problem of evil as it presented itself in the world of politics, and throughout his prose Milton has a single answer to this question, the answer which I quoted above: "You, therefore, who wish to remain free, either instantly be wise, or, as soon as possible, cease to

be fools; if you think slavery an intolerable evil, learn obedience to reason and the government of yourselves." The English people, in other words, had failed in their quest for liberty because of a moral weakness within them. "It is not agreeable to the nature of things that such persons ever should be free." This answer, however, merely transfers the problem of evil from the political realm to the individual, and the question remains as pertinent as before. If liberty is nowhere to be found on earth because of the moral weakness of most men, what can be said of a race of beings in whom the good is so perpetually thwarted? It is this question which Milton undertakes to answer in his two great epics, and it is because he succeeds in answering the question—to his own satisfaction at least—that he claims to have justified the ways of God to men.

It is only in the light of this question that Milton's epics can be understood. They are usually read—and taught, for that matter—as "mere literature," as sound and fury, whereas they are in fact a high order of poetry of prophecy, and contain a poetic treatment of life which seems to me applicable and pertinent to the world of all times. Milton's dogma is not accepted to-day, but that in no way effects Milton's vision or Milton's poetry.¹

What is Milton's answer, as given in the two great epics, to the problem of evil as he envisaged it? In a prose outline, of course, his answer loses its essential quality, its poetry, and becomes just another moral theory.² Yet it is perhaps worth setting down such a prose outline, as a guide to the reading

¹ As a matter of fact, it is easy to show that Milton did not take his dogma much more seriously than he took his astronomy. I do not wish to argue the point here; and it is an unimportant point anyhow, for no poet can be judged by the external truthfulness of his beliefs. I should not be adding in the least to Milton's importance if I proved that his theology, or his cosmology, were in accordance with our contemporary beliefs.

² A comparison of the two epics with the *De Doctrina Christiana* would reveal much as to the true nature of poetry, and as to the gulf between poetry and philosophy, theology, or any type of prose thought.

of the poetry, where the ideas may be found in their true meaning, ennobled by the moral grandeur of the man who is presenting them, transmuted by imagination, and related to fate and nature and eternity. . . . First of all, it must be understood that Milton believed in the goodness of all matter, all material—believed, in fact, that it was all part of his pantheistic deity. Secondly, Milton pictured man's soul as consisting of reason and passion. By reason he seems to have meant a combination of consciousness and intuition and the ratiocinative faculties. Both the qualities—reason and passion—are good. Milton goes so far in his respect for passion and the physical side of life as to make the angels in heaven partake of sexual love. But reason is good absolutely, whereas passion is only good when it is controlled by reason. Uncontrolled, it is the source of all moral evil. In fact, moral evil means just that to Milton: the overthrow by passion of the restraining influence of reason. When this happens, the individual can no longer be free; he is the slave of his desires, and a community made up of such people is not capable of political liberty. In the twelfth book of *Paradise Lost*, Michael explains the meaning of the Fall, and draws the political analogy which is so illuminating to any one who knows Milton's prose:

Yet know withall,
 Since thy original lapse, true Libertie
 Is lost, which alwayes with right Reason dwells
 Twinn'd, and from her hath no diuidual being:
 Reason in man obscur'd, or not obeyd,
 Immediately inordinate desires
 And upstart Passions catch the Government
 From Reason, and to servitude reduce
 Man till then free. Therefore since hee permits
 Within himself unworthie Powers to reign
 Over free Reason, God in Judgement just
 Subjects him from without to violent Lords:
 Who oft as undeservedly enthrall

His outward freedom: Tyrannie must be,
Though to the Tyrant thereby no excuse.
Yet sometimes Nations will decline so low
From vertue, which is reason, that no wrong,
But Justice, and some fatal curse annex
Deprives them of their outward libertie,
Thir inward lost.¹

So the Fall is the subjugation of reason to passion; and, in *Paradise Regained*, the Redemption is the triumph of reason over passion. Throughout the two epics, Satan stands for revolted and uncontrolled passion. He is, as M. Saurat says, "the prototype of all that Milton execrates—tyrants, kings, popes, priests even." Because in the first books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton has given to Satan magnificent speeches of defiance and revolt—speeches in which much of his own intransigence must have found relief—many critics have been blinded to the part which Satan actually plays in Milton's story. But in *Paradise Regained* this part becomes unmistakably clear, for in that poem the Son, representing mankind, combats Satan, or passion, and overcomes him by the power of reason,² thus re-establishing the moral balance and showing that man has, within himself, the strength to achieve moral worth, and with it liberty. Read in this light, and by one who is willing to take the trouble to understand what Milton means, *Paradise Regained* becomes one of the most grand and elevating poems in English, and not the least part of its greatness comes from the fact that Paradise is regained by a moral victory in the desert

¹ To avoid confusion, I wish to point out that this passage—at least after the first four lines—is nothing but prose which has been put into metrical form. Therefore, nothing which I have said about the impossibility of expressing a poetic idea in prose would apply to these lines.

² This "reason" of Milton's must never be confused with the "pure reason," or scientific faculty, of which the Eighteenth Century made so much. The word is very confusing to a modern reader; but when Milton wrote it had not the ambiguity which is now troublesome.

and on the mountain top, rather than by the episode upon the cross.

A consideration of the Fall, as Milton pictures it, and of the characters of Adam and Eve, will throw further light on this psychological dualism which underlies all of Milton's thoughts about the race of man. All people, he believes, have the two faculties, reason and passion; but man, at his best, is the more reasonable sex, woman the more passionate. Neither a man nor a woman, according to Milton, can reach full development without the co-operation and companionship of the other; but just as within an individual reason must direct passion, so within the marriage relationship man—in whom reason is stronger—must direct woman, who is the representative of passion. All this is illustrated by Milton's story of the Fall. Eve is led astray by Satan because her reason is blinded by her feelings. Adam, on the other hand, falls with his eyes open, falls because he voluntarily submits to passion,

Against his better nature, not deceav'd,
But fondly overcome by Femal charm.

Critics have occasionally taken these lines as a somewhat lame attempt to excuse Adam. They are nothing of the sort. When Adam tries to take refuge in that excuse, and complains to the archangel Michael that man's woe all begins from woman, he is answered sternly,

From Man's effeminate slackness it begins,
Said th' Angel, who should better hold his place
By wisdom.

This conception is the central point in Milton's justification of the ways of God to man. If Adam fell—that is, if evil exists—because he had no choice but to fall and be carried away by his desires, then man's universe would be, from

its foundation, an unmoral thing. But if Adam fell because he consciously submitted his reason to the control of his passion,¹ and if he, or mankind, may be redeemed by a reversal of this process—which is the subject and the meaning of *Paradise Regained*—then man's universe is a moral one, in which he has the power of exercising choice, and in which evil may be controlled, perhaps expunged, at least in the lives of individuals.

It is Milton's success in uniting a most thoroughgoing individualism with a moral austerity and a moral idealism, which gives him his peculiar interest and importance for the modern world. Such poetry of prophecy would be of high benefit to the human spirit in any epoch, but it happens also that there is an adventitious timeliness about Milton's work to-day. For we too, in the Twentieth Century, are attempting to be individualists, and the question which Milton asks, and which we can well afford to consider, is whether such an attempt can succeed unless we set as an ideal the governing of our unruly natures. Can a state be free, in which the citizens are incapable of self-control and self-direction? Can an individual be free, except by a vigilant and conscious struggle to command the forces within him, rather than to obey them? Is it liberty, in other words, to be quite unrestrainedly subject to a succession of appetites, without ever seeking a more conscious purpose behind any act?² Milton answered "no" to all these questions. Any one who shares the modern spirit of individualism and who wishes to examine the possible implications of his creed, or any one who finds the thought of living in an unmoral world both painful and dull, should discover in the works of Milton not only great poetry and the expression of a great spirit, but timely appeal.

¹ Compare *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, lines 896-959. Choice could not be more conscious and deliberate than it is pictured here.

² A fascinating modern consideration of these questions, a probing and subtle consideration, will be found in the following books by Mr. Warner Fite: *Individualism* (New York, 1910); *Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1925).

3

It is interesting to compare Milton with Shakespeare. The two men are almost opposites in regard to upbringing, education, and—so far as we may judge of Shakespeare—attitude toward life. Shakespeare was a poor country boy, and his greatness was clearly the result of native genius, unhelpt from without. He had the humanity of one who has associated through most of his life with quite ordinary men and women, and who has come to understand his fellows and hence to care for them. He had the direct and simple fondness for nature, and the direct and simple method in describing her, of a poet who had grown up in the rural world. Milton, on the other hand, was London born and bred; and he was provided throughout his life with financial security. In education, he was offered every advantage; and since he made diligent use of all that he was offered, he became the most learned of English poets. After Saint Paul's School, and Christ's College, Cambridge, he spent six years quietly in the country for the purpose of further study. By the end of this time his erudition was extreme, and also his linguistic attainments. Milton composed verses in Italian, Greek, Latin, and English, and he possessed a reading knowledge of several other languages. City-bred, and with an education so extensive, it is natural that there should be a tinge of bookishness on much that Milton wrote. This is, of course, to his disadvantage as a poet, for the poetic treatment of any subject is immediate and unsophisticated. As far as training for poetry was concerned, it is probable that Shakespeare's lot was the more propitious one. He could not have understood many of the books which Milton pondered, but he could understand the men and women whom he would meet in any tavern or on any country road, and he could understand the countryside itself. It would be a mistake, of course,

to picture Milton as lacking in this care for things which are "simple, sensuous, and passionate." For example, in the third book of *Paradise Lost* he writes—lamenting his blindness—

Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the chearful waies of men
Cut off.

This is Milton speaking from his heart, and it is one of many passages which suggest that the bookishness of Milton's poetry has been exaggerated by critics. Akin to this exaggeration is the usual picture of Milton's austerity. Many writers show him as a man never interested in anything more lively and light than scholarship or religion. This is a ridiculous view of Milton, who in his private life seems to have indulged a moderate, Horatian epicureanism. For instance, he writes as follows to his friend Skinner, asking him to put aside serious concerns for the time being and to join the author in indulging a lighter mood:

To-day deep thoughts resolve with me to drench
In mirth, that after no repenting drawes;
Let *Euclid* rest and *Archimedes* pause,
And what the *Swede* intend, and what the *French*.
To measure life, learn thou betimes, and know
Toward solid good what leads the nearest way;
For other things mild Heav'n a time ordains,
And disapproves that care, though wise in show,
That with superfluous burden loads the day,
And when God sends a cheerful hour, refrains.

And in a similar mood he writes to his friend Lawrence:

The Womb of Nature and perhaps her Grave,
Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,
But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt
Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless th' Almighty Maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more Worlds,
Into this wild Abyss the warie fiend

Stood on the brink of Hell and look'd a while,
Pondering his voyage.

What I should call the bookish element in this passage is the intellectual nature of the descriptions. Chaos is a region "without dimension, where length, breadth, and highth, and time and place are lost"; and later, it is "the Womb of Nature and perhaps her Grave." This is description in terms of *ideas*, rather than in terms of sensuous imagery, which is the normal method of poetry. There is no question about Milton's success; but his example is a dangerous one to follow, as the desert of Eighteenth Century verse will testify.

Another illustration of Milton's style at its most characteristic is the passage where Eve laments, on learning of the exile with which her sin is to be punished:

O unexpected stroke, worse then of Death!
Must I thus leave thee Paradise? thus leave
Thee Native Soile, these happie Walks and Shades,
Fit haunt of Gods? . . .

. . . O flowers,
That never will in other Climate grow,
My early visitation, and my last
At Eev'n, which I bred up with tender hand
From the first op'ning bud, and gave ye Names,
Who now shall reare ye to the Sun, or ranke
Your Tribes, and water from th' ambrosial Fount?
Thee lastly nuptial Bowre, by mee adorn'd
With what to sight or smell was sweet; from thee
How shall I part, and wither wander down
Into a lower World, to this obscure
And wilde, how shall we breath in other Aire
Less pure, accustomed to immortal Fruits?

Again in this passage we find the intellectual abstractness of description. The walks and shades of Paradise are "happie," and "fit haunt of Gods." Neither of those qualifications call to mind anything that can be seen, or heard, or smelled, or touched: they suggest ideas merely. And the same is true of

the flowers "that never will in other climate grow." What do such flowers look like, and what is their scent? . . . Even when the description verges on the physical, it remains abstract; Eve's bower was adorned "with what to sight or smell was sweet." Compare this with Shakespeare, who creates a picture even while describing something abstract—a song—

Mark it, Cesario; it is old and plain;
The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones,
Do use to chant it.

Perhaps the most striking element in Milton's style is his use of sonorous, but abstract, adjectives like "illimitable," "eternal," "immortal," "irrevocable." Here Milton is violating one of the canons of modern criticism, and his success suggests that there is something wrong with the criticism. It is true that abstract adjectives, no matter how alluring their sound, are apt to weaken poetic effect; yet, in view of Milton, it seems equally true that they may greatly strengthen such effect:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie
With hideous ruine and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,
Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms.

Almost the only words in the passage which are not abstract are "chains," and "fire"; but the qualifiers, "adamantine" and "penal," cancel any effect of the specific even there.

In contrasting Milton and Shakespeare on this point of abstractness, it is hard not to assume—what could certainly never be proved—that the difference between them is caused by the difference between a contemplative life and a direct, immediate experience with living. At any rate, whatever

the reason, it is the vivid, the specific, the concrete, the thing that may be touched or seen, which Shakespeare's mind naturally remembers. Instead of such phrases as "bottomless perdition," or "hideous ruin," or "unexpected stroke," we find "my way of life is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf," or "sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care," or "consumptions sow in hollow bones of man."

There is another quality which stands out in considering the passages which I have quoted from Milton; this is the rhetorical note, which is to be found in much of his best poetry, and which is perhaps due in part to his constant reading of the Romans. The rhetoric in Milton does not necessarily interfere with the poetry. For example:

But O the heavy change, now thou art gon,
Now thou art gon, and never must return!

Or,

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrevocably dark, total Eclipse
Without all hope of day!

Both of these passages are rhetorical; but they are also poetic. It is a common error in criticism to assume that rhetoric and poetry are incompatible. Rhetoric is not, in itself, poetic; in fact it is likely to hinder poetry; but it need not do so, as English Seventeenth Century literature abundantly proves. The Seventeenth Century is shot through with rhetoric—which is the literary counterpart of the baroque architecture of that period, also misprized to-day—and nobody can understand the poetry or the prose of that very great age if he remains obstinately prejudiced against rhetoric. Mr. T. S. Eliot acutely remarks of the Elizabethans,

we cannot grasp them, understand them, without some understanding of the pathology of rhetoric. Rhetoric, a particular form of rhetoric,

was endemic, it pervaded the whole organism; the healthy as well as the morbid tissues were built up on it.

This was true of the Seventeenth Century as well as of the Sixteenth.

The rhetoric in Milton's poetry does not form a sharp and invariable contrast with Shakespeare's work; for there is much rhetoric in Shakespeare also, rhetoric of a sort which, as Hamlet says of Laertes' too gaudy grief,

Conjures the wandering stars, and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers.

But Shakespeare at his best is not rhetorical:

But wherefore could I not pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

Or,

Methinks I hear
Antony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
The luck of Cæsar, which the Gods give men
To excuse their after wrath: husband, I come.

There is no rhetoric here; no literature; only poetry.

This antithesis between Shakespeare and Milton holds good from no matter what point of view they are considered. All of Milton's work is obviously based upon a religious view of life; in Shakespeare's poetry, a religious basis is so far from obvious that a discerning critic has concluded that Shakespeare had no religion at all. Again, Milton's poetry derives much of its importance from the way in which it expresses, quite irrespective of the subject matter, his own exalted, and exalting, personality. The reader is never, for long, unaware of Milton, whether in "Lycidas," or the epics, or "Samson Agonistes"; to read Milton is to associate with

him, and to associate with him brings a strengthening of spiritual integrity and of purpose.¹ With Shakespeare, on the other hand, no reader is privileged to associate. And from his poetry we derive, not strength and purpose so much as wisdom, and an increased awareness of, or pleasure in, the simple elements of experience. It is the contrast between a high and dedicated austerity on the one hand, and on the other a world-wide humanity. A similar contrast could be drawn between Washington and Lincoln.

It seems graceless to make comparisons between such men; yet it is worth pointing out that although the qualities of Shakespeare lend themselves to poetry more readily than do the qualities of Milton, still, both in the transitory world of events and also—through personal influence and example—in the world of the spirit, the qualities of Milton are at least as needed and as rare as any other human attainments. Shakespeare is admittedly the greater poet; but I should by no means allow that he is the greater man.

¹ Compare the following lines, written to Milton by Keats—a poet who would not be in sympathy with the harsh and dour figure whom so many readers have imagined to be Milton:

I swear!
When every childish fashion
Has vanished from my rhyme,
Will I, grey-gone in passion,
Leave to an after-time
Hymning and harmony
Of thee, and of thy works, and of thy life;
But vain is now the burning and the strife,
Pangs are in vain, until I grow high-rife
With old Philosophy,
And mad with glimpses of futurity.

Chapter Five

SWORD OF LIGHTNING

Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.

I

In speaking of poetry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, I shall abjure the terms "Classical" and "Romantic," and illustrate the trends of both ages by examining the work of Shelley. I do this for several reasons. In the first place, it is my belief that the terms classicism and romanticism, as tagged to the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, suggest inevitably—though not necessarily—a complete break of continuity which a study of these periods does not bear out; and that in addition, the terms are so subject to individual interpretation, and have been so subject to numberless definitions, that as short cuts in criticism they are no longer useful,¹ and in a special critique such as this not even usable. In the second place, according to the theory of poetry outlined in the first part of this book, the Eighteenth Century is a perfect illustration, in a negative fashion, of the inextricable relationship between the dominant qualities of a society and the literature produced for and by that society; and Shelley, in the short but significant growth of his spirit, almost recapitulates the history of tendencies from 1669 to 1815, and certainly illustrates in his inner life, as revealed in poetry, the essentials of those attitudes toward life which are commonly called the classical and the romantic.

The Eighteenth Century in England, politically speaking—and one cannot speak at all of that civilisation without in-

¹ William Allan Neilson's *Essentials of Poetry* has made the terms lucid and helpful, wherever one may presuppose a knowledge of this book.

cluding or implying its political life—began with the Revolution-Settlement in 1689. In terms of fact, that settlement inaugurated a long era of *laissez faire* policy, a political stagnation during which Tories and Whigs, to the fanfare and excited tumult of the multitudes, alternated in picturesque and theatrical fashion their majesty of power. It was an aristocratic age. The Whigs and the Tories probably thought themselves worlds apart in intention, however closely related socially, but in so far as they effected or announced their intentions, they seem retrospectively to have embodied much the same ideals—or rather, ambitions, for one can hardly use the word ideals in connection with most Eighteenth Century Englishmen; they would have considered the word a little vulgar, smacking somewhat of that most reprehensible thing, “enthusiasm.” No, Whigs and Tories, however they varied in details of policy, in means toward the end, really sought one end, which was the maintenance of a *status quo* in their political and social and economic institutions. The country was prosperous. It was, in the main, and despite the loss of the American colonies, successful in its foreign policy. Whatever battles England lost, whatever wars were unpopular and somewhat wasteful, the chief end of her relationships with the rest of the world was successfully served—that is, a balance of power was preserved and thereby her trade flourished.

The new and growing middle class (together with the landed gentry with which it overlapped and interlocked) was of course a commercial class, and this body was intent upon material prosperity as such a body always is, for except through prosperity it does not exist. The stability of trade and of finance—of economic institutions—was therefore quite inevitably its political aim, and thus, owing to the interfusion of the merchant and landholding classes, the whole political power of England was bent upon maintaining a balance of power in Continental and overseas market,

equable taxation and customs, freedom of the sea, and the political impotence of the Roman Catholics who were all supposedly Jacobites and longing for the return of the Stuart régime.

The religious spirit slumbered heavily in the Church of England and among the educated classes throughout the Eighteenth Century, but the national spirit was strong, and the freedom, the prosperity and the civilised way of life which they were enjoying was a deep emotion in the hearts of most Englishmen. They had struggled and suffered in the revolutions of the previous century. They had attained an excellent resting place—a government which to-day we see to be aristocratic but which for that day was extremely pliable and equable. The British Constitution was the marvel of the Continent, and Englishmen felt such pride in it that the thought of “reforming” it—of disturbing its delicate adjustment of balance and check—was a heresy which filled them with horror.

The later years of the century, from the beginning of the war with America in 1775 to Waterloo in 1815, were years of trouble and misery. The industrial revolution was reaching already an effective influence which could not be ignored, and the excitement and danger of those years, the hopes aroused by the French Revolution, produced a charged atmosphere of tension and a restlessness which only the fears stirred up by the excesses of the Reign of Terror in France and later the immediate threat of Napoleon’s power, repressed into inactivity. During this time England experienced the loss of the American colonies, the defeat of the second Pitt’s agitation for Parliamentary reform, the spread of colonisation, and the Irish horrors and compromise, in addition to two such significant publications as Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, and the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Of these two books, the former reconciled economic theory and practice, making immediate theories useful and showing

the theory of immediate uses; the latter annulled, by transcending, all the metaphysical and theological speculation in which some of the best minds of the Eighteenth Century had, with almost entire futility, spent themselves.

2

As we know it from the points of view of politics, philosophy, and literature, this is a singularly unified period. It is an age of great individuals, and yet all of those individuals bear with unusual indelibility the imprint of their time. In a sense, of course, they created their time, but the strange thing is that although unlike as individuals, they all bear fundamental likenesses to each other. There is something provincial in the spirit which prevailed, although that spirit centred about London, and was urban in most of its manifestations and tastes. The great names of the century are intimately connected, and the atmosphere of the clique is rightly or wrongly typified for us in the numberless satires of the period, satires which then required no footnotes to bring home to their readers the stinging attack or the complacent eulogy. I imagine that most readers, barring scholars and specialists in the period, tend to picture the coffee house—Will's, for example—as the inevitable background for all the intellectual endeavours of the age. One pictures the great men always there, sitting about and drinking the coffee which some one in 1660 had complained of as being “most useless since it serves neither for nourishment nor debauchery.” We can hear Dr. Johnson's voice, saying, “Sir, the first Whig was the devil,” and the assembled company, in its agreement or disagreement, we expect always to be Amiable, Genteel, and Benevolent.

There is a reason if not an excuse for such a fancy. The outstanding minds of the age had really an avowed community of tastes and ambitions. Pope is hardly an Amiable figure; Johnson was hardly, in the dictionary sense of the

word, Genteel; nor was either Swift or Mandeville notable for Benevolence. But socially these three words are fairly typical of the ideal virtues of the day. However varied the individual methods of subscribing to them, they all subscribed in some fashion or other. Dr. Johnson was unorthodox in hating affectation and in denying that the world was a pleasant place, but he subscribed to the most entrenched Toryism—which was equivalent to saying that, politically, whatever was, was right. The intellectual life of the age, in fact, reflects for the first time in English history a dominant common-sense middle class—that rapidly increasing and intelligent class which is now called the backbone of a nation; and it also reflects for the first time a distinctly “literary” class, in which were included the now almost entirely differentiated groups of statesmen, journalists, moralists, theologians, and philosophers. Canning was both a statesman and a poet; Pope was not only dictator of poetry, but in terms of the age a philosopher; Swift was a figure in politics and the Church, as well as in letters, and Chesterfield was, let us say, all sorts of things. These men were all concerned with a few general issues, their concern taking the form of embattled pamphleteering upon questions of theology, politics, and literature; and even more excitedly concerned with themselves, their gossip and their personal peculiarities. It is perhaps because of the fundamental agreement amongst them—this tacit decision that however they quarrelled over the incidental management of life, they were at one in thinking their own wits sufficient unto the day—that within those limits of uniformity men were free to develop their peculiar oddities, their own personalities, to a degree which has since that time been forbidden under pain of disapproval. In an age such as our own, where almost no one agrees with any one else on many fundamental points, the superficial conformity is unduly stressed as being vital to the health of society.

It is interesting—exciting, rather—to ponder this Eighteenth Century London and its contributions to the history of western thought; for here if ever, one thinks, is a bare approximation to the ideal of the artistic Utopian: a society small enough to be intimately and personally connected with all intellectual movements, and an aristocracy which has not only leisure but a community of aims and ideas and interests. Most ideal states are reminiscent of Athens, where the artists were also soldiers and statesmen; where, apparently, every one who knew anything at all knew just what he thought of Euripides' latest drama, or Socrates' views on immortality, or Pericles' handling of the delegates from Sparta. The Eighteenth Century Londoners sometimes spoke of their city as the modern Athens, and certainly there was some reason for this complacency. But the strange thing is that this nucleus of brilliant and active men, who so nearly included all the creators and judges of governmental policy, of art, and of philosophy, contributed so little that is ultimately significant. It is true that enormously important contributions were made by that age, but very few within the unassailed and voluble group which professed enlightenment its purpose, which dictated its own tastes and prejudices as ideals for an admiring public.

So far as literature is concerned, these people accomplished wonders, but, naturally enough, these wonders were largely in the field of prose. Prose as a pliant and workable medium, in fact, we owe directly to the Eighteenth Century, when the novel was launched as an art-form, when literary skill and ability were as requisite to the politician and the journalist as were thought-content and idea. Of poetry we should expect less, despite the Utopians, and certainly we find less, achievement. We find, in fact, an amazingly analogous balance of virtue and defect between the poetry and the current thought of the age. Poetry is not an utilitarian art, as we have been told endlessly. It cannot be made the hand-

maiden of any established creed or group-feeling without suffering its most essential loss, its whole integrity. The poet's creed, of course, may turn out to be much like an established creed, just as his emotion may find answer in a group; but the thought and the feeling must be essentially the poet's own, in an exclusive sense, before it may be transfused into poetry which will speak significantly to any audience not subscribing *a priori* to the creed or feeling. In other words, no verse written expressly for or by any group (even if that group comprise only two people) is worthy of being called poetry.

The critical method of this book is acutely tested by the Eighteenth Century. Why, one may ask, if poetry is poetry by virtue of its high seriousness or intensity, and if it gains in importance as it embraces ultimate questions in terms of current thought, as it *interprets* its age to the future, as it stands on the peaks of ultimate verity wrapped in the garments peculiar to its age—why, if this is so, am I able to retain this theory and at the same time to say that the Eighteenth Century in England was pitifully poor in poetry? Pope, let us say, wrote a philosophical poem which attempted to “vindicate the ways of God to man,” to explore the “latent tracts, the giddy heights.” In carrying out this plan he was conscientious in using the current theological terminology of his day, and it would be unfair to deny him sincerity in purpose. But sincerity is not passion, and since passion is the emotion we generally agree lies behind and accounts for intensity, I could, of course, cut short the argument by saying that I find no passion in the “Essay on Man.” This is perfectly true, but there are other factors underlying this lack and, I think, accounting for it—factors more easily accepted than the subjective criticism, which might with justice be construed as a defect of appreciation on my part, rather than as a defect of creative ability on the part of Alexander Pope.

The "Essay on Man" may seem an unfair illustration, in that it challenges comparison by reason of its purpose and content, with such poems as *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, and the shallowness of its philosophy has for so long been assumed that the very juxtaposition of titles is absurd. Even Dr. Johnson, who generally found in Pope not only a dazzling poetic quality but "elegance of description and justness of precepts," and who shared the veneration in which Pope was held by his contemporaries, even to the point of declaring his translation of the *Iliad* "the noblest version of poetry which the world has ever seen"—even Dr. Johnson became sarcastic in commenting on the great truths set forth in the "Essay on Man." However, there is little doubt that Pope himself intended a moral and religious epic, and that even after it had been pointed out to him that he had not in any sense of the word thought beyond the smooth plausibility of his borrowed doctrine, he was content to discover himself anew as a significant philosopher when Warburton took up his ever ready cudgels to vindicate the words of Pope to man. The weakness of the verses lies not, however, in the fact that Pope's doctrines are from an opposed point of view unreasonable and untenable, but that they were inconsistent with themselves, never felt, never truly imagined. They served no purpose to Pope, spiritually, and except for wounded vanity he could have discarded all the ultimate doctrines of the poem as easily as his waistcoat. One may be an entrenched agnostic and still find in Dante and in Milton the most abiding and significant truth. And, finding this truth, the fact that *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* were written in terms of a civilisation and a symbolism alien to one's own life, is provocative of a richer pleasure than that which touches one's own spirit—a pleasure in the assurance of at least some tendency toward immortality of those values in life which survive costumes and creeds and languages.

I am not trying to limit Pope's claim as a poet to the

"Essay on Man," admittedly the worst of his long original pieces. But in examining the fallacy of such a statement as the famous "Whatever is, is right," we enter into that field of theological and philosophical controversy, which is the very pulse of the Eighteenth Century; the virtues of which lay, ultimately, in its thorough wrong-headedness. For, blindly, stumbling with persistently averted eyes, the numerous participants in the Deist controversy did at length prove to us, though not always to themselves, that certain things are not so, and in striving toward this important though negative conclusion, they opened paths of speculation which have been of immense importance to their successors.

The controversialists, or at least the orthodox among them, were so given indeed to affirming that everything was for the best in this best of all possible worlds, that we may gain some idea of that refusal to face facts which permeates the current thought, by examining Pope's specious words. If whatever is is right, then nothing is not-right; in other words, nothing is wrong. And if nothing is wrong, there is no such thing as wrong, and if there is no *wrong*, there cannot be *right*, except in so far as right is simply a synonym for *existent*. Ergo, "Whatever is, is"—a statement which only the tortuously metaphysical would attempt to deny, but which hardly lifts our spirit to a peak in Darien.

3

In that section of the chapter on Milton which dealt with his religious and moral beliefs, we found a word which was, with a changed meaning, to assume such importance in men's minds as an ideal, that it has given a name to the dominant quality of the Eighteenth Century. The word is, of course, Reason, and from the variations and changes in the use of this word, the spiritual history of two centuries could be deduced, or at least suggested. Milton, as we have seen, meant by Reason all those powers of receptiveness, criticism,

and creation which belong to man's mind as distinguished from the less definable qualities of energy and native light which he attributed to the soul, and which he postulates as of equal importance under the name of Passion. Man, in other words, is a being who believes and feels and who thinks and chooses, and only in so far as he exercises to the fullest extent both these capacities is he fulfilling his potentialities for good.

There is some qualification of a scientific sort which could be added to this, but except for those who can with honest conviction assert a pure materialism, untainted by spirit, a more lucid or inevitable moral foundation for life could not well be devised. Certainly it is hard to see how any serious poet could set himself under another standard, although any one with ingenuity can find other terms for clothing the same idea. For in a world where there is no belief¹ in the spirit there is no function for poetry except as a form of intellectual athletics; and if there is no belief in the reason there is equally no function for poetry. The spirit without reason is at home in a wordless mysticism; and the reason without spirit is at home in a syllogism.

It is natural that a world which was discovering modern science should have lost sight of this basic principle. Men of deep spiritual power are rare in any age, and the specious rationalisations of the mind are tempting to all but the occasional few who are informed with inner light, and those who by some accident of experience are emotionally and mentally adult. When we say, therefore, that the Eighteenth Century was the Age of Reason, we must first remember that the current definition of reason was one which would have excluded all intuitive and imaginative processes. We must also remember that in labelling the age, we are

¹ By "belief" I do not mean dogmatic assertion backed by proof, or even theory, but that deeper affirmation of the spirit which does not require for its existence the logical support of the mind, but which, of course, always desires this support.

judging it by the written record it has left behind, and that there were variations almost as infinite as mankind beneath the surface tendencies of this, as well as of any other age. There is very little pure faith in this world of mystery, just as there is very little pure scepticism, and it is not strange that the theological controversialists of the Eighteenth Century should have thought that they were synthesising old beliefs with new knowledge, when all the time they were trying to find in the synthesis of all knowledge a new belief.

It is generally enough understood, perhaps, to be taken for granted, that Christianity, as a religious faith, lost its absolute hold on men's minds when the rationalising spirit of the Protestants passed from the fervent hearts of a small group of men into the mass mind. Catholicism is a complex structure, but it is firmly knit and inextricably whole because it grew empirically from a basis of simple faith. It was natural that when its real tenets became obscured by the superstructure, men of native faith should deny the latter and return to the former. But in order to do this the Protestants had to fight, and argue. They had to defend their God, and prove that the Catholics had misinterpreted His laws—that they had, indeed, never heard the voice of the true God. And bearing in mind the fact that although the average man needs a God, he only needs Him at rare moments, and is content when he is not in need to accept almost any creed which sounds plausible and has the confirmatory allegiance of numbers—bearing this in mind it is easy to see that a God who needed defence could not have had to the average mind the terrifying and awful majesty of a God whose nature and decrees had never been questioned.

And so Protestantism, in itself a deeply religious movement, was the beginning of scepticism. Doubts, probing, and compromise followed fast on the first adjustment, and in 1688 Bossuet's *Histoire des Variations*, summarising the ramifications of sect which had followed upon the break

with the Papacy, expressed in terms of Catholic ridicule an uneasiness which the dissenters were themselves beginning to feel. In a world in which many groups of men were worshipping the same God and using the same Bible for their authority, but where each denied authenticity to the other's beliefs, the next step was obviously to find a principle which would be common to all. That principle was naturally Reason—for it was Reason which had revolted from the excesses of Popery, and it was Pure Reason which had invaded the fields of speculation (as a first principle, rather than a means toward ascertaining first principles) in the philosophy of Descartes. The invasion took the path of Newton's mathematical discoveries, and his mechanical view of Nature.

The outcome of the attempts to apply these principles to the spiritual world is not even yet fully apparent. In the course of the argument, men came upon the historical method of inquiry, upon the social sciences, upon democracy, and socialism—all of which tools we are still learning to handle. But from the point of view of spiritual truth, the attempt to identify Nature with Reason, and to found a Natural religion, ended in the blind alley of scepticism, and indicated quite definitely that science could not, by the mathematical method at least, effect a rational synthesis between the objective and the subjective worlds.

To the modern reader the maddening thing about this whole controversy is the refusal of its participants to face the real issues. Scepticism was fashionable in conversation, but the Eighteenth Century is notable for propriety (of a sort); notable at least for that compromise between principles and expediency so beautifully illustrated in the ruling class, which nobly bought and sold offices in the avowed cause of honest government. Christianity was respectable and right, as well as useful. It kept the lower classes quiet in hopes of a better world, and it satisfied the baser instincts

of those inferior men who could not rise from superstition to the worship of Pure Reason. Therefore, they said in effect, let us by all means keep Christianity, but let us purge it of those excrescences of Revelation and authority which make it a childish superstition rather than a Rational belief. On the other hand, let us keep enough revelation and enough authority, so that it is still Christianity and not a poisonous form of Deism; let us keep Good and Evil after a fashion, and Free Will, for without hope of Heaven and fear of Hell the people will never preserve Decency and Order and Respectability. This they found to be an impossible compromise, and the orthodox defenders retreated step by step, saving as they could any possible shreds of authenticity.

It would be hard to say which side blundered more consistently. The Deists got the better of the orthodox, but proved nothing in doing so. It is often, indeed, impossible to say which side was which, as the position of any man, in the midst of so much rancorous and muddy thought, was dependent chiefly upon whether or not he used the orthodox or the new terminology, or upon his avowed purpose. The chief difference was that the members of the Church, although in general they were as sceptical as the Deists, were dependent upon preferment for their livings, and never could face the fact that their assumptions, if carried to a logical conclusion, would be heresies; whereas the Deists were usually dissenters and had nothing to lose by nomenclature except the approval of conservative society.

To trace in detail the eddyings and progress of this argument would be tedious as well as unnecessary. The age was really indifferent to speculative truth, and the minds which carried on the battle for and against natural religion were, with a few exceptions, commonplace and incapable of profundity. The essential problems all arose out of the one basic question from which diverge all philosophies—the question of whether or not the universe is monistic or dualis-

tic; and, if monistic, whether it is a matter or spirit; if dualistic, what the relation may be of matter to spirit. Now before Hume, philosophy and theology were inseparable, which probably accounts for the inadequacies of the Deist controversy. To postulate an anthropomorphic Creator, and then attempt to devise a system of Nature which either limits or embodies that God is a thankless task, since if God is limited by Nature he is not, at the very least, the Christian God; and if he is embodied by Nature, he is not God but Nature. It was also almost impossible to look to the natural world for the example of Deity, without having to face the esoteric questions of Free Will and Original Sin, and from this dilemma most men took refuge in a shallow optimism. It was easy for the orthodox to say that God would compensate man in Heaven for his undeserved sufferings on earth, although they found this whim difficult to motivate in a Rational God. The Deists, who wanted nothing which was either "against reason" or "beyond reason," stressed the fact that if the heavens declared the glory of God—if Göd had, in fact, revealed Himself in Nature, it was strange that the wonders of Nature were so productive of misery to mankind.

This is only a fragmentary hint of the kind of argument which stirred up so much bitterness and wasted so much paper during the Eighteenth Century. Since the real issue of the controversy, in terms of immediate effect, was the prestige of Christianity, we may say that the thing was effective. Some of the dissenters branched off into Socinianism, but the number of sceptics grew and has been growing ever since. Hume showed conclusively that both the Deists and the Christians had equally proved one fundamental point; that "the method by which alone . . . truth could be discoverable, led to the hopeless attempt of getting out of ourselves and seeing things as we do not see them."¹ In brief,

¹ Sir Leslie Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*.

the mind could learn nothing except from experience. This honest and revolutionary discovery not only ended the controversy, in so far as it had any basis in a philosophical method, but also put all succeeding metaphysicians under the necessity of using an entirely different angle of approach. Since Hume, indeed, any one who is honest and capable of thinking below the surface, must relinquish the futile attempt to measure the world of the spirit by the yardstick of reason.

After Hume's attack the religious argument, as a polite recreation and an excuse for private warfare, grew less fashionable, but it bore strange and momentous fruit. In France, where political tyranny was identified with established Catholicism and religious intolerance, it was natural that the religion of reason should have become identified with a hatred of the Church, and with the new political radicalism, and thus have played an important part in the Revolution. In England, where religious tolerance was accepted in all except political fields, there was not much motive for any such identification, and so the atheistical violence of Tom Paine, which was an honest revelation to the man in the street of the essential findings of the learned disputants, did no more than spread the scepticism of the upper classes among the lower, and set going the slow fermentation of new social ideas which eventually helped produce in England a democracy.

It was not Hume, then, who disseminated scepticism, for no mind such as his could impress itself upon the world immediately, nor was Tom Paine more than a manifestation of a tendency already widespread. The three chief sources of the decay of faith were more immediate. The first was the natural and increasing loss of prestige to Christianity, as men handled its creeds, twisting and shaping them into the most fantastic shapes, using them for and against numberless fallacies. The second was the factor which had, indeed, first led men to attempt to widen their religious tenets—

the growth of a mathematical science, the widening scene it displayed to men's minds, and the apparently successful attempt to apply the mathematical method to the science of man. Astronomy had made space almost inconceivable, and geology was already pushing back the barriers of time to an extent which troubled the believers in Genesis. Geography had revealed the fact that Christendom was only a little community on the face of the earth, and chemistry and physics were working apparent miracles. One sees in this scanty survey the beginnings of that scientific evidence which has tended to discredit Fundamentalist Christianity, and which in the Eighteenth Century led to the third peg for scepticism to hang on—the beginnings of historical enquiry. This last point was a most important one, for throughout the Deist controversy the issues had been confused by the lack of any such method. Neither side had been consciously trying to abolish religion, but the Deists had been attacking historical Christianity and the orthodox attempting to defend it, and both sides had been ill equipped with knowledge. Indeed, each side at times seemed to feel that the whole question of the authenticity of Christianity rested on this question: Did Christ actually work miracles and rise from the dead; or, as the Deists said, were his disciples egregious liars?

It is perhaps natural that the Eighteenth Century in England should have been the poorest age, spiritually, of which we have any detailed knowledge. It had many of our faults, but it acknowledged or recognised few of them. Men professed belief in many things, but they actually believed deeply in almost nothing except such complacent convictions as these: that England was a splendid and enlightened nation, that trade should flourish, that order should be preserved, and that life should be pleasant, comfortable, and not too arduous. Passionate belief, or Enthusiasm, was frowned upon as vulgar and unbecoming; respectability was to be preserved at any cost, and nothing which threatened the middle class

virtues was to be approved. Utility was more sensible than idealism, and common sense was the standard by which all things were to be judged. Fanaticism was indecorous, and scepticism socially inexpedient, and so the sermons of the day were remote from the instinct of faith and unspeakably dull. The Church was as populous and as strong as ever, politically, but it was filled for the most part with men who would profess anything for advancement, and who quite shamelessly neglected their charges. Men were keenly interested in politics and science, for these bore directly on economic conditions, and the pervasive middle class ruled by virtue of economic advantage. But government was not yet in their hands, nor had science made them, as it has made most of us, humble and bewildered; and so when we look back upon these men, and try to judge them by their works, we first grant them a great humanity, a sympathy of man for man which necessarily carried much sentimental cargo but which was sincere and heartfelt to the point of actions so significant as prison reform and the abolition of the slave trade; and despite many individual exceptions, we also pronounce them worldly, slaves to materialism, spiritually timorous, and self-satisfied to a degree unequalled by any age which preceded them.

4

From our point of view, in considering the synthesis which poetry effects between the world without and the world within man, the progress of thought during the Eighteenth Century indicated all the trends of our later development, and science as well as philosophy squirmed uncomfortably on the horns of the dilemma which still impales us. And it was in the Eighteenth Century that there began a significant movement, one which in its origin and methods deserves more intelligent thought as a major problem than we are inclined to give it. This movement was Revivalism—the

first indication in the western world of the complete divorce between religion and theology. Until the Cartesian revolution in science had, through Newton, swept the intellectual world off its feet and apparently changed the whole outlook of the human mind—until this time religion and science (that is, factual knowledge) had gone hand in hand. Science had been another word for *observation* and *experience*; man was a God-created being who dwelt in a God-created, objective universe. But the Aristotelian method, which regarded nature as “a hierarchy of different types of objects each striving to fulfil its purpose of attaining perfection in its own way,” gave way in the Seventeenth Century under the system of Descartes to a new view, a “sublime faith that Nature is a great harmonious and mathematically ordered machine.”¹ The goal of science became, not the classifying and ordering of the external world and the natural laws that govern it, but the *discovery of causes* in every department of life; an attempt to doubt every scrap of intuitive knowledge which could not be proved, and to explain geometrically every phenomenon of the universe, from the course of the planets to the most subtle emotion in the heart of man. In other words, science hoped to have an objective and exact knowledge of certain aspects of human life which can, so far as we now know, only be postulated as subjective; and the intelligent laity, those who were attempting to apply mathematics to humanity, confused the two words, *cause* and *meaning*. Find the cause, they said in effect, and you will have the meaning.

Now this, which is still the supposititious ideal of science though not any longer its practical object, this breath-taking perfection of synthesis, seemed necessarily to imply a creator, and the fact that the Newtonian conception ignored the now vital element of Time, enforced further the assumption of a Deity. The machine had been created whole and perfect,

¹ Quotations from Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, 235.

and without an evolutionary conception, such a creation necessitated a practical-minded and omnipotent God. Here, then, is the real heart of the futility and illogicality of religion in the Age of Reason: the Newtonian science forced men to believe in a God who had, with one fell swoop of the hand, created the world; a God who, however, could not be allowed to interfere with his perfected handiwork. It is the old question which we still have with us, wherever men try to explain the intentions and methods of God—the idea that God arranged the Universe, set it in motion, and promised himself that he would not interfere with his creation. Granting a God, this is of course as possible as any other theory, but it does not seem to the modern mind an essentially reasonable conception. In a world in which everything, including man's spirit and mind, functioned from necessity, and in harmony with a few simple natural laws, exceptions were unthinkable. Practically speaking, then, how could there be any progress, how could there be any miracles, how, in short, could historical Christianity be anything but a violation of the sanctity of the Cosmic system? It was only in the Nineteenth Century, when Hume's titanic scepticism took full effect, that a new conception of science was evolved.¹

Hume proved that reason is nothing but experience; that nothing is valid knowledge unless it is the result of sense-impression; that what we call cause and effect (necessity) may be only the *apparent* order of things; that the reverse of anything we can affirm may be true; that, in fact, as Kant logically deduced from him later, "the mind of man cannot know reality as it exists, if indeed there be any such world at all apart from man's mind." We shall see more of the effects of this revolutionary theory in the discussion of the

¹ It was Kant who offered the world a reasonable refutation for this confusing and unprofitable rational religion. But Kant, although he eventually exerted an influence which is still powerful, did not affect English thought until the Nineteenth Century.

modern world, where biology and evolution have brought in the element of Time, and have once again reduced matter and spirit to the mystery of separation which held the Middle Ages. Here it is only necessary to note briefly what effect the rational view of the universe had on the general trend of thought during the Eighteenth Century.

The effects were of course manifold, and in the field of scientific knowledge almost immeasurable. In the general effect on men's minds, the Newtonian view produced two opposite moods. One was the optimism noted above, a perfectly justifiable optimism in the light of current belief. God was in His heaven, and just as soon as man could say exactly why the snail was on the thorn—in other words, when he had discovered the immutable laws of Nature—he could, with the aid of Reason, obey those laws as invariably as the tides and falling bodies obeyed the law of gravitation. When this happened, man would be enlightened, happy, dwelling in harmony with a vast perfection of system and in the end would go (with, of course, a decent lack of Enthusiasm) to his reward—the exact nature of which was best not examined too closely. It will be seen that this belief, in so far as it prevailed, was a comforting one, leading to a satisfaction with things as they were; and, paradoxically, leading to that belief in the perfectibility of man which had two such opposite issues as Rousseau's identification of Natural man with primitive man, and the more subdued Nineteenth Century doctrine of Utilitarianism.

These developments, however—complacency and social science—were the heritage only of the educated classes. The new science was not for the masses—its underlying principles were beyond their minds, and its derivative philosophy, passionless and remote, could not displace in their minds the more simple conception of a powerful anthropomorphic God who would Himself look after such complicated ideas as destiny and purpose. Ignorant men and women, struggling

for existence in a world where Nature was an enemy to Human Nature, could have found no comfort in the enlightened conception of the Universe, even had they understood it. They wanted and needed the bread of hope rather than the stones of scientific acquiescence, and what we term Methodism, or the Wesleyan revival, was the inevitable outcome of the starvation of soul to which rational religion had subjected the masses.

Methodism has been called a reaction. If we grant that the educated thought of any age is its dominant tendency, it was certainly a reaction away from the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Rationalism, which both Deists and orthodox accepted with differences, but in which both met on the understanding that religion was a science, and not in any sense an instinctive need; that Rationalism which more and more steadily emphasised the supererogatory qualities of morality. It is scarcely necessary to say that so far as we know religion *is* an instinctive need; and when we remember that among the masses the old Christian morality had never been replaced by another system of ethics, we are not surprised at the dramatic fashion in which the "religion of the heart" and the revival of the strict Puritan code, caught up the working classes of England in a whirlwind of hysterical evangelism.

Wesley went straight back to orthodoxy—an orthodoxy of his own, still familiar to the modern world as Fundamentalism, and combining the worst features of all previous manifestations of Christianity. Wesley derived his logical justification from Law, that amazing mystic and competent satirist, but he was himself temperamentally incapable of mysticism, and after he had borrowed a reasonable foundation with which to front the Rationalists, he proceeded to build up a superstructure which for dogmatism, narrowness, and ugliness had never before been equalled. Law had answered the Christian controversialists in their own terms.

He agreed with them that revelation and the Scriptures were not a sufficient proof of Christianity; but, he continued, he knew intuitively that it was true, just as the disciples had known. There is no reply to such an argument except scoffing, which is not logical disproof. Having, then, an armour against the Rationalists, Wesley, who was as practical and superstitious as Law was visionary and ascetic and pious, took from the literal text of the Bible his religious code. He ignored entirely the spiritual glory of Catholicism and denied categorically the germinal conception which had preceded Protestantism, that God speaks to man through his own conscience more clearly than through a church or creed, but took from both all those elements which the new knowledge had shown to be obstructive and confusing, and by means of the evangelical methods still practised to-day, won such a following that eighty years after his death there were twelve million Methodists in the world—a fearful and humbling thought.

And so we are back again to the heart of Milton's teaching. Reason and Passion were separated, and little good could come of it. Whatever our creed or philosophy, there is no denying that most men seem to be compact of these two qualities. The Eighteenth Century progressed to its close, in much the same dilemma which still exists and from which the world still suffers heavily. Reason (stripped of its intuitive and imaginative qualities, and representing the pure logic of the intellect) was barrenly pursuing rational religion into a blind alley. Passion was being organised and directed into a channel which was in every sense off the new highways of human life. For the first time since the western civilisation had got under way, thought and taste and culture and knowledge were cut off from the vital and resistless energy of religious faith, illustrating "the two-fold truth that powerful religious movements often originate in social strata lying far below the reach of philosophy, but are doomed to ster-

ility if they cannot assimilate some philosophical element.”¹

It remained for Reason and Passion to discover their respective need for each other and seek a fruitful union. On any inclusive or corporate scale this has not yet been done, but in a few individuals imagination and the intellect, feeling and thought, soon began to bring back to the world a long-lost harmony. This fusion of all man's native gifts into an ordered beauty is the movement which closes the Eighteenth Century, the movement which I have refused to call the Romantic Revival.

5

Through Pope's soft song though all the Graces breathe,
And happiest art adorn his Attic page,
Yet does my mind with sweeter transport glow,
As, at the root of mossy trunk reclined,
In magic Spenser's wildly-warbled song
I see deserted Una wander wide
Through wasteful solitudes and lurid heaths.
—THOMAS WARTON, "The Pleasures of Melancholy."

Poetry in the Eighteenth Century suffered directly from all the attitudes of mind which in the world of action produced a barren religion of reason and a mischievous religion of emotion; and from a political balance which allowed the individual free development but kept institutions and corporate movements in a static sluggishness. There can be no poetry without "enthusiasm" on the part of the creator, and enthusiasm as we have seen was precisely the quality most derided by the orthodox critics who presided over literary circles. On the contrary, enthusiasm was the basic factor of Methodism, and the unhampered use of the reason was impossible to one who accepted the religious creed of Wesley. This creed contained a central core of truth, but it was a truth not integral with its superstructure, and unintelligible in its real sense to most people. That is, the mystical ac-

¹ Sir Leslie Stephen, *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, II, 434.

ceptance of intuitive belief—what was discussed in Part One as the realisation that there are two worlds and two truths—is as solid, as undeniable, as any reality life offers us, but the mind which honestly discovers this fact does so only after the labour of difficult thought, of testing all the impossibilities of a more factual synthesis between matter and spirit. This proof, this testing and thought, Law had gone through before he reached the logical position in which knowledge could stand honourably beside faith and defend it from the impurities, the ignorant absurdities, and thoughtless acceptance which destroyed all virtue in the position as usurped by Wesley. I do not mean by this that Wesley was not sincere. He wanted to restore to England faith and a strict moral code, and in an age in which everything was tested rationally he borrowed mysticism as the only rational basis for his *a priori* ethics. In doing so he raised a still enduring banner to the ruling spirit of his age, and gave us a grave illustration of that Eighteenth Century sentimentalism which still persists.

Sentimentalism is another word which has been so variously interpreted and misused that one would prefer to avoid it with cumbersome circumlocutions. But the quality is so necessarily important in any discussion of the turn of the century, and so often confused with another Eighteenth Century product, Sensibility, that some re-defining seems inevitable.

These two words both have roots in a common derivation, the Latin verb meaning *to feel*, and they became prominent in an Age of Reason. Sensibility as represented in *The Man of Feeling*, in *Tristram Shandy*, and increasingly in verse as the century wore on, is often confused with Sentimentality, but although the two qualities often exist together, they are by no means identical. Sensibility I understand to be a basic factor of personality; as old as friendship and love and mercy; a capacity for being quickly and easily af-

fect. It involves the gentler emotions rather than the passions. It is simply *a way of feeling* about incidents which usually have in themselves no apparent excitation to the emotions, and *it has nothing to do with thought*. There is no ideational factor in sensibility. The feelings are aroused, and the mind recognises the fact.

Sentimentalism, on the other hand, is not a basic factor of personality. It is a *way of thinking*, and our ways of thinking are dependent upon a combination of native powers, environment, and education—upon the whole adjustment between the personality and the kind of life we live. It is of course allied originally with the emotions, as is most of our thought, but it is entirely a thing of the mind and for the sake of clearness this should be remembered. During the Eighteenth Century people of sensitiveness, finding no appreciation of their “Nice Feelings and Fine Shades” in the common-sense, unimaginative complacency about them, naturally went to a ridiculous extreme and made a cult of such emotions as were not too violent to be acceptable in an age which distrusted passion. It was, in effect, a compromise between the two opposite extremes of sense and enthusiasm, rational religion and Wesleyanism.

Sensibility, then, is a delicate and faintly melancholy way of feeling and Sentimentalism is a wilful ignoring of facts, a determined belief in what we want at the moment to believe, despite any available evidence which, if taken into consideration, would force us to change our minds. The former often begets the latter, but Sentimentalism may exist as the result of passion, of fear, of conventionality, and of expediency. And Sensibility may not only exist *in vacuo*—that is, occupy the mind without arousing thought or conclusions—but it is, in some form or other, a part of almost every human being, and an essential factor in all poetry. For example, Shelley and Byron are often grouped together under a charge of Sentimentality. Both are consistently sensitive—that is, being poets, they respond to emotional stimuli with an intensity

which is determined almost entirely by their own temperaments, and not by the thing-in-itself. Byron, however, was always under the tendency to fall into sentimentalism, unless he was writing satire, whereas Shelley, endowed with greater sensibility, is almost never sentimental, except in the early verses, which are not properly poetry. At the time that these early verses were produced he was viewing life in an almost entirely sentimental fashion, and it is interesting to reflect that this was due to his determination to follow the Eighteenth Century philosophers under the banner of Reason.

The poets of the early Eighteenth Century mistrusted sensibility; it is an unreasonable thing, and not conducive to rational living. Lacking passion, therefore, and lacking the minor graces of sensibility, they substituted for these emotional factors a "literary passion" which never took flame and rarely overleapt the confines of the decasyllabic couplet.

An excellent example of this devitalised poetical emotion is Pope's rendition of those most poignant letters which Heloïse wrote to Abélard . . . "those celebrated letters"—as Pope said in the Argument to his verses—"which give so lively a picture of the struggles of Grace and Nature, Virtue and Passion":

Still on that breast enamour'd let me lie,
 Still drink delicious poison from thy eye . . .
 Ev'n here, where frozen Chastity retires,
 Love finds an altar from forbidden fires.
 I ought to grieve, but cannot what I ought;
 I mourn the lover, nor lament the fault;
 I view my crime, but kindle at the view,
 Repent old pleasures, and solicit new;
 Now turn'd to Heav'n I weep my past offence,
 Now think of thee, and curse my innocence.

There are pages of this excellent verse and bad poetry, but the one extract will probably suffice to show what I mean. This is *description* of passion; the kind of thing an accurate

observer might report. It is Reason at a literary ball, wearing the mask of Passion.

The minor poets of a later day, however, groping their way toward an honest expression of their sensitiveness to nature, instinctively followed the confused path pointed out by their times, and thought of their kinship with nature in terms of the Nature-machine to which the disciples of Shaftesbury had devoted their Epic similes. And because these tendencies and attitudes were so mixed, Sentimentalism frequently followed the indulgence of Sensibility, just as it had followed the optimism of the earlier versifiers.

The following passage from Pope, for instance, displays no particular Sensibility, but great Sentimentality:

The state of Nature was the reign of God:
 Self-love and Social at her birth began,
 Union the bond of all things, and of man.
 Pride then was not; nor arts, that pride to aid;
 Man walked with beast joint-tenant of the shade;
 The same his table and the same his bed;
 No murder cloth'd him, and no murder fed.
 In the same temple, the resounding wood,
 All vocal beings hymn'd their equal God:
 The shrine with gore unstain'd, with gold undrest,
 Unbrib'd, unbloody, stood the blameless priest:
 Heav'n's attribute was universal care,
 And man's prerogative to rule, but spare.
 —"Essay on Man."

Pope may, it is true, have believed that man had fallen from the gentle and pious state of savagery, and he may sincerely have hoped that at some time in the conveniently remote future all the luxuries and the corrupt extravagances of civilisation might be banished in a return to this felicity. He may have believed this, and judging from the persistency of the theme even unto Byron, we must conclude that it was a widespread sentiment, and allied naturally to the philosophy and hopes of

perfectibility then current. But in any case the belief was thoroughly sentimental, and although Pope's just-quoted Sentimentality was probably based on a half-hearted acquiescence in popular opinion, Rousseau's similar wrong thinking was based on a veritable passion of desire to believe. In Pope's case the belief led to cold couplets; in Rousseau and the Perfectionists it fired a nation to spectacular deeds.

The chief themes of the Age of Reason which have been branded as Sentimental, are, first, the recurrent identification, cited above, of natural man with primitive man, and second, the kind of tear-dropping melancholy which sought Solitude and bleak graveyards as a purge for human vanity. The first idea, inasmuch as it prompted men who were thoroughly urban and dependent upon the society and the comforts of town life to sigh for a state in which they would have been more miserable and less virtuous than they were in London—this idea is entirely Sentimental. It ignored reality and facts. Feeling, however, has nothing much to do with reality or facts, and the second theme, as an impulse, is perfectly authentic, and inasmuch as it was sincere was a sign of Sensibility.

Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is the best example one could find of Eighteenth Century Sensibility rising above the usual ornate timidity it prompted in the Polite Poets, and never once sinking to the maudlin excesses we find in Richardson's novels, in Sterne, in Mackenzie, in Smollett, or in much of the minor verse of the day:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
 Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
 Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
 They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
 Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
 With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd
 Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

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On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
 E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
 E'en in our Ashes live their wonted Fires.

These stanzas show a heightened sensitiveness, rather than any passion, but the sensitiveness though heightened is restrained. It is sincere, and impressive, and has a satisfying, a *fulfilling* quality, which can not be found in much poetry which soars higher on more impetuous wings. It will be seen that I need here a word which I have foresworn, and I shall let Mr. Neilson speak it for me: “. . . Its preëminent qualities are those of fitness and beauty of form. In spite of the pervading mild melancholy of its atmosphere, it is not highly subjective; it is a sound piece of *classical* art.” (*Italics mine.*)

Gray's "Elegy" is the *fait accompli* of what neither the couplet-poets nor the men of Sensibility could effect. It is Sensibility used legitimately, to shape thought into poetry, whereas the following stanzas are an example of Sensibility running riot. The stanzas are taken from Jago's "The Goldfinches" (1753) and are preceded by some quatrains in which the "airy seat" (i.e., the nest) of the birds is described, and "the infant pledges of their faithful loves" noted; and then comes the passing of a schoolboy, "the most ungentle of his tribe":

On mischief bent, he marked, with ravenous eyes,
 Where wrapped in down the callow songsters lay;
 Then rushing, rudely seized the glittering (*sic*) prize,
 And bore it in his impious hands away!

But how shall I describe in numbers rude,
 The pangs for poor Chrysomitris decreed,
 When from her secret stand aghast she viewed
 The cruel spoiler perpetrate the deed?

"O grief of griefs!" with shrieking voice she cried,

"What sight is this that I have lived to see!

"O! that I had in youth's fair season died,

"From love's false joys and bitter sorrows free.

"Was it for this, alas! with weary bill,
 "Was it for this I poised th' unwieldy straw?
 "For this I bore the moss from yonder hill,
 "Nor shunn'd the ponderous stick along to draw?

"O plunderer vile! O more than adder fell!
 "More murderous than the cat with prudish face;
 "Fiercer than kites in whom the Furies dwell,
 "And thievish as the cuckoo's pilfering race."

etc., etc.

This was a serious poem—one which undoubtedly was thought to display an Elegant fertility of Conceits, the most Benevolent and Amiable Fancy, and a most refin'd Poetic diction. For us, of course, it has all the burlesque charm which the typical third-rate verse of any age has for its patronising successors; but I quote it to show that it is not the sentimental stuff we might at first sight consider it. Sentimentality is important because it is a matter of thought, and therefore may be excessively harmful. "The Goldfinches" could never mislead even an admirer. In so far as it is based on any idea at all, that idea is that cruelty causes suffering—a contention no one would deny. But Jago is simply refusing here to think, and giving his emotions rein; exaggerating his own hatred of cruelty and then endowing the Feather'd Victim with words in which to bewail her distress. The emotions are out of all proportion to the incident, but as emotions they are perfectly valid.

This is a long digression, but it seems to me a point important enough to justify the space given it. Most matter-of-fact people give as one of their reasons for disliking poetry the fact that it is frequently sentimental. The defence is only too likely to admit the charge, or to confuse the refutation by pointing out the difference between sentiment and sentimentality—an abstruse difference—difficult to define, and difficult in special instances to determine. But although poetry which rises from and aspires toward the emotions, is always in dan-

ger of falling into sentimentalism, it is, in view of the fact that the mind coöperates, equally in danger of falling into didacticism; and neither of these dangers is significant of more than the general truism they illustrate—that poetry is very seldom poetry, because there are few poets. The poet is necessarily sensitive. The stuff of much of his work will therefore be the stuff of sensibility. But, sentimentalism being intellectual dishonesty, the inner truth which the true poet is seeking to express can never result in sentimentality, and the true poet will inevitably be instinct with an intensity which alchemizes the nonsensical possibilities of sensibility into the pure metal of passion.

In minor poetry, however, we will find sensibility in innumerable forms, most of which tend in a few definite directions. The sensitiveness may be restrained, natural, and moving, as in Byron's "She Walks in Beauty." It may be exaggerated to any degree, from the lushness of parts of Keats' "Endymion," for example, to the goldfinch nonsense quoted above. Or it may be confused in the writer's mind with sentimentality, and so be repressed and denied and pruned, as it often is in modern verse, thus leading to a bare realism or a timid triviality.

The Eighteenth Century, in making a cult of sensibility, was only in this pursuing its usual course of half measures; of making an end of what should have been a means toward an end. After the extravagances of most Seventeenth Century verse, the young poets of the new Age of Reason sought a simplicity and a perfection of form which they thought they were borrowing from the Ancients; they succeeded in perfecting a medium, but in so doing they stressed form to the sacrifice of content, and thereby lost all sense of poetic style¹—style being form and content inextricable; content dictating form, rather than form a Procrustes' bed which lops and stretches the subject. They lived in an age of mistaken beliefs—beliefs which were, however, necessary as stepping

¹ Compare Mrs. Olwen Ward Campbell, *Shelley and the Unromantics*, 223-224.

stones in the progress of thought and knowledge—but because these beliefs served a purpose, and were necessary though mistaken, they soon became sentimentalisms. Nature, which is properly a simple and inevitable part of the life-breath of poetry, became a machine-god, conventionalised and capitalised out of countenance. Humanitarianism, coming slowly into being, became a theme for didactic, moralistic men of sensibility. Men who were native to towns, and who best expressed themselves in the greatest satires in our language, Struck from the Warbling Lyre their Epic Similes of the Nymphs and Swains of the Cot, and provoked a reactionary realism which failed equally to be poetry.

The poets of the age were of course individuals first, and secondarily products of their times. Had there been born then a poet of the calibre of the few greatest, the gain would have been immeasurable—not only because of the actual poetry he would have given us, but because we should be able to see more clearly the values of the age in terms of those who were born into it, and helped make it. For the great poet is more than an individual first and secondarily a product of his times. He is these things, and he is in addition the everlasting truth of the spirit, using the transient as well as the enduring forces of his age, and thereby lifting that age to the heights where time waits upon meaning. The minor poet, on the other hand, either ignores his age, or is dominated by what he thinks it stands for, or reacts against it. In ignoring it, he necessarily becomes artificial, for no man can speak poetry except in the language native to his thoughts. In following his age, with an avowed purpose of expressing it, he is lending himself to corporate and superficial thinking, which is generally mistaken, and at least never contains the concentrated personal truth to which the poet is dedicate. And if he reacts entirely against contemporary thoughts and moods, he loses the inevitable *rightness* of actuality; he breaks the subtle trend of thought and history which have led up to the point in time at which he

stands. He loses, in fact, his heritage, and however meagre and counterfeit the heritage may seem to the inheritor, it is all he has of material goods, and to a rich mind and spirit a little is much.

There is no doubt, however, that the immediate surroundings of a poet hamper or aid him; that some ages would seem to have made the rich mind and spirit a natural attainment, and thus to have upheld their major poets, and lent a wider dignity and validity to their minor poets. The Eighteenth Century was decidedly not such an age—it was unified enough to colour in its own dye all its writers, but it was half-hearted and mistaken enough to send its only inspired poet into a reactionary protest which caused him to exaggerate his weaknesses. The age of “tea-pot pieties” and “tape-yard infidelities” could not make Blake any the less a poet, but it directed and goaded him often into tendencies which were marring and superficial.

Bring me my bow of burning gold;
Bring me my arrows of desire;
Bring me my spear: O clouds, unfold;
Bring me my chariot of fire.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

Blake was a passionate believer, and fanatically religious. In a religious age or in harmonious surroundings, such intensity more readily conserves itself, is relieved of the necessity of continuous negation and reiteration. But a deeply religious spirit, surrounded by callous indifference or, what is worse, by word-of-mouth allegiance to superficial doctrines, will almost always be goaded into raising its voice in over-emphatic or even in didactic protest, and when this fate overtakes a poet it is of detriment to his poetry. Blake was probably as thorough-going a mystic as ever took the trouble to be an artist. It is

seldom that one finds the visionary acceptance of all life in combination with a mind restless to create, an overwhelming energy and sensitiveness to such concrete materials as words and colours and lines. But Blake not only saw visions; he was one of the most hardworking and bewilderingly productive of artists, and his mind was a chaotic and uncritical ocean under tempest, pouring out in profusion pictures and ideas, all welded into a pantheistic conception of humanity and divinity; confused at times, at times rather interesting than lucidly beautiful, but on the whole illustrating a deep and wide single vision. The unity is and must remain a miracle of poetic genius. The uncritical levels of the mind were in Blake somehow critical, and there was inherent in his most far-flung imaginings a purpose, a conception of life, a religious desire, which rang the chaotic intuitions into harmony. It is this profusion of image and symbolism, naked from the secret places of his mind, that has led to the profitless discussions of Blake's sanity. It is true that the images and the symbolism have the impetuosity and sometimes the apparent discontinuity of mad men's speech; but over and under them all is a sane mind apprehending reality, and fusing them with significant ideas.

It is, I think, a mistake to say that Blake was a poet despite his times. Coming as he did after the orthodoxies of the Eighteenth Century had really spent themselves, he displays the virtues of their defects, and is supremely of a piece with his age. When his inspiration flags he is obviously being guided by a reactionary negation, with results which are poetically almost profitless, since one must study them as one would a prose treatise in order to apprehend their profound meaning. But when he was at his best, Blake was more than a reactionary—he was a poet of affirmation, although his affirmations were all in the exactly opposite direction from that followed by the Polite Poets of the Eighteenth Century.

For Blake was a prophet. He was the first poet of the

Eighteenth Century whose spirit was ample enough and searching enough to discover the kernels of truth which lay hidden in the many contending factions of the day, and whose native power was intense enough to fuse them into a whole. He was an ardent Humanitarian and Revolutionist, and yet he could interpret life in terms of these feelings, without writing treatises on them. He was the first poet to proclaim the fallacy of the hopes that came to men with the new science—the hope that poetry and science could fulfil the same wants, start from the same premises. He learned from the mistakes of the Deists that religion could not be squared with appearances in the natural world, and from the mistakes of the Christian divines that Christianity could not rest upon a factual basis. He deduced, from his hatred of the lip-morality of his age, a morality of his own—a horror of tyranny, a reinterpretation of traditional doctrine, and a pantheistic worship which in its imaginative realism belongs to a world quite other than the “bowers of innocence and ease” in which the fancy of his predecessors had revelled. He discovered within himself a religion, consistent, all-embracing, a religion which is often tacitly called sentimental, and which as sometimes interpreted would seem to have been maudlin. But Blake’s religion was not the sweet, limpid, childlike thing it is often inferred to be. It is a challenging and powerful acceptance of all darkness and all light, strangely akin to Shelley’s conception in the “Prometheus Unbound,” but permeated with a Biblical tinge which Shelley’s terminology lacks.

Blake believed that scepticism was the original sin, in that it was barren and negative: “Man,” he said, “must have some religion; if he has not the religion of Jesus he will have the religion of Satan.” Now according to Blake the religion of Satan was rife in the world, Satan being no other than God, or Jehovah, or the Creator; and therefore orthodox churchmen were Satanists, worshipping an evil spirit who had made

man sinful and endowed him with a decaying body.¹ Mere nature was Satanic, and the human body was a "vegetable," having no ultimate significance. The true God was the divine soul, the principle of good informing the whole universe, binding the material world and man into a spiritual entity. Christ as the symbol of this divinity had redeemed man from the bondage of the body, from the power of the Evil Creator, the Satanic God. In other words, man was compact of good and evil: "God is no more than man, because man is no less than God."

Blake shared with many of our poets, with such otherwise contrasted men as Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Swinburne, and Whitman, a passion for liberty. He hated the indolent indifference to spiritual truth which surrounded him. He hated the fettering moral codes men had devised, the sexual morality and material vanity of the commercial middle classes. He felt it his mission to preach a new gospel of humanity and divinity—a gospel which would make men free—free first of all of the strictures of mortality:

For when Jesus was crucified,
Then was perfected his galling pride.
In three days he devoured his prey,
And still he devours the body of clay;
For dust and clay is the serpent's meat,
Which never was meant for man to eat.
—"The Everlasting Gospel."

When men had once realised that their souls were divine and that their bodies were comparatively unimportant, they would then be free of those man-devised creeds and systems of ethics

¹ This conception was obviously a direct attempt to balance the scales against the sterility of Reason, which Deists had identified with the creative God of Nature. Blake made use of Milton's philosophy, and naturally confused the latter's use of Reason as the virtue of God, with the restricted sense in which the word had been used during the Eighteenth Century. It was this interpretation which led Blake to say that Milton had, without knowing it, been of the party of Satan—a mistake which has been seized upon and reaffirmed by critics and unorthodox poets, and has greatly interfered with an understanding of Milton's two greatest poems.

which were not only ugly, and destructive to the natural pleasures of life, but were degrading and wrong in that they laid all stress on the transient and insignificant doings of the material man. The real morality was a steadfast belief in the soul of man, an unwearying forgiveness of the sins of jealousy and hate, a spontaneous acceptance of the love which embraced and had redeemed all life, and an abnegation of self in the principle of Good:

When will the Resurrection come, to deliver the sleeping body
From corruptibility? O when, Lord Jesus, wilt thou come?
Tarry no longer; for my soul lies at the gates of death:
I will arise and look forth for the morning of the grave:
I will go down to self-annihilation and eternal death
Lest the Last Judgment come and find me unannihilate
And I be seized and given into the hands of my own selfhood.
—“The Book of Milton.”

When man is free and moral in this sense, then:

Heaven, Earth, and Hell shall live in harmony.

In his limitations Blake shows the hampering effects of his age. He was a mystic who was so horrified at the visible results of the cult of Pure Reason that he went to the almost Wesleyan extreme of refusing to believe anything which might have been proved, and in this way he often sacrificed contact with what we call reality, and occasionally ended in spiritual abstractions or Ossian-like banalities which were as remote and lifeless as the worst formalities of the earlier “classical” poets. In his temptation to contradict his age, he sometimes went to extravagances of denial and denunciation which belong rather to prose than to poetry. And finally, falling in love with his own strange and fantastic mythology, he so loaded his prophetic books with irrelevant detail that the thought-content of much of his work is scarcely to be apprehended by the reader who seeks poetry and is only for the student who seeks Blake. By reacting against the barrenness of his predecessors,

Blake sacrificed much that might have been fruitful to him, and certainly lost entirely the discipline of form¹ they had undergone. What is of far greater importance, he swung to an extreme which made him unintelligible to his contemporaries, so that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, who should have been the inheritors of his affirmations, were instead forced to do the work of reinterpretation over again from the beginning. But although Blake in his age is a miracle, he is, like most miracles, inevitable and natural. He is inextricably of his age; but like all true poets he is also above it. His lyrics belong to all time, and the poetic truth of his work is now a part of the stream of current thought.

6

. . . mighty were the auxiliars which then stood
 Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
 Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
 But to be young was very heaven!—Oh! times,
 In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
 Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
 The attraction of a country in Romance!
 When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights
 When most intent on making of herself
 A prime enchantress.

—WORDSWORTH, "French Revolution."

When the last hope of trampled France had failed
 Like a brief dream of unremaining glory,
 From visions of despair I rose, and scaled
 The peak of an aëreal promontory.

—SHELLEY, "The Revolt of Islam," Canto I, 1.

"Gloom and misanthropy," wrote Shelley in the Preface to "The Revolt of Islam," "have become the characteristics of the age in which we live; the solace of a disappointment that

¹ When Blake was inspired he had no need of this discipline, for his lyrics are magically right in their divergence from orthodoxy. It is in his longer poems and the satires that we often find really poor verse as distinguished from not-poetry.

unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair." And it has become natural in some minds to associate the so-called romantic revival in poetry with the kind of stubborn proclivity to melancholy with which Peacock disports himself in "Nightmare Abbey." Definition does not alter this association, because there is ground for it. However one attempts to define this new quality which has been called romanticism—whether one calls it imagination, or religion, or a heightening of theme—the fact persists, and transcends the qualities of the actual poetry, that the poets themselves became serious. It is not necessary to stress the fact that every thinking person feels himself an exile in this world; but until the end of the Eighteenth Century men had felt, if not in their own hearts at least on all sides of them, a supporting faith that beyond death some meaning or purpose would welcome them and invest with significance the long struggle of life.

During the Eighteenth Century, as we have seen, this faith was weakened by the tacit efforts of thinkers to discover some more immediate and palpable significance for the struggle, and, in large communities of thought, was either destroyed or changed to a helpless agnosticism. Both the denial and the suspension of belief have widened down to our own times; and the attempt to fix all creation and eternity and infinity within the span of man's consciousness is probably now the dominant expectancy of the laity from the researches of science.

Hand in hand with this early expectancy went Humanitarianism and along with the new sensibility of man for man's suffering there grew up the sentimental notion that simple people were finer and more capable of significant emotions than those who had been "polish'd into torment." The whole trend of the century had indicated an intellectual preparation for Democracy, and the industrial revolution soon made it apparent that expediency would support theory. But with the tales of excesses and horrors which came from France to England, and with the uncomfortably revolutionary idiom of political

reform as advocated by Priestley and Price and Tom Paine, the governing and commercial classes took alarm, and many of the theorists, the intellectuals who had loudly acclaimed the advent of Republicanism in France, became discouraged by the dismal results of the Revolution.

It was of course time that the excessive hopes of men should have been moderated, that men should have been stimulated by failure into a re-examination of the principles of life, before they went further on false assumptions in the reordering of the premises of society. Dr. Johnson had known

How small of all that human hearts endure
The part which laws or kings can cause or cure . . .

and the realisation that we must change or improve our own natures before there can be any possibility of an Utopia, is one which we must all learn for ourselves, over and over again. Thus it was a salutary return to fundamental preoccupations which marked the discussion of poetry in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth was not occupied with the technical problems which had marked Eighteenth Century criticism. There was no necessity for his discussing the methods by means of which Invention (that earmark of Eighteenth Century poetry) could simulate passion, by which Fancy could so divert the reader that he might forget to ask what, in the name of all creation, had become of Imagination. Wordsworth, being himself a poet, and sharing in a widespread dissatisfaction with unrelieved common sense, was intent upon announcing what people had almost forgotten—that poetry was philosophy and truth, “general and operative.” In proclaiming this he also proclaimed a theory of attaining this truth; and, as is always the case when one bases a general theory on a particular practice, occasionally overreached himself and rationalised most dismally.

Any one familiar with modern poetry has only to reread the

Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* to see how truly the prophecy of Wordsworth's secondary aims in poetry has been fulfilled. He need not be surprised that the main contentions are forgotten whenever there lives no great poet to remind us by example that poetry is a high art. But any one can try to write poetry, and most of the moderns have adopted Wordsworth's method of simplicity, directness, the employment of the real speech of men, and the avoidance of abstract conceptions. Wordsworth, as Mr. Lowes has pointed out,¹ when he wrote his inspired poetry used the real speech of William Wordsworth; and thus did no more than return to the language of all great poetry, which is that native to the man who writes it; but when he wrote verse, or rode his theory, he used a verisimilitude of the speech of the common people which, as it was foreign to his thoughts, contrived to give an effect as artificial and as remote from poetry as the most elaborately windy verbiage of Henry Brooke or Prior.

This point does not assume much importance as an influence in poetry until modern times, when we find underlying the so-called realistic schools, of both prose and poetry, an aggravation and misinterpretation of Wordsworth's dictum that in the lives and the emotions of simple, crude people the poet or imaginative writer comes closer to poetry than in any other walk of life. There are elements of truth in this theory, but they are only elements, and divested of the falsities of the notion they reach out and embrace all lives and emotions and all subjects which any poet is capable of realising. These elements of truth, therefore, destroy utterly the theory they inhabit.

There was, however, a deep authenticity for this statement on Wordsworth's part, a realisation of which will illustrate a point in early Nineteenth Century adjustment, and clarify a certain confusion of thought about Shelley which exists in the minds of most casual readers.

¹ *Convention and Revolt in Poetry*, 213 ff.

Wordsworth and Shelley were both deeply moral and deeply religious poets.¹ They both looked out upon life, from the time of our earliest records of them, with a thoughtful and inescapable wonder. The questions of life and death and man's destiny, which move all of us at moments, were never pushed aside in their vision, but underlay their immediate preoccupations, and shaped their lives. They both shared also, to a strong degree, the Humanitarian impulse, the realisation that the "people" should be the justification and reason for all social institutions, rather than their victims and slaves. Wordsworth had been among the young men who had hoped most from the French Revolution, who had suffered most deeply when the rebels outdid their oppressors in merciless tyranny, and it has been assumed that because he lost faith in the immediate perfectibility of man, from the political point of view, he was a turncoat and renegade; hence the handful-of-silver nonsense for which of course Browning later apologised, and the unusually unjust sonnet of Shelley's. Wordsworth, however, had made the same adjustment with the downfall of his hopes which Shelley had to make before he could become a poet, and although he abandoned political aims in his poetry, whereas Shelley could never quite give up his Utopias and clung to them by pushing them further and further into a vast futurity, Wordsworth really preserved in his modified philosophy more of his actual political principles than did Shelley. He turned his hopes to the common people, the oppressed and the poor—those who had been expected at the time of the Revolution to become suddenly endowed with all the light of humanity and justice and reason. From this hope sprang his

¹ I am aware that one usually apologises for Wordsworth's uneventful and idyllic life by the lakes, and upholds his poetic reputation by inserting a footnote about his illegitimate French daughter; and that contrarily one usually apologises for Shelley's aberrations by quoting the testimony of those of his contemporaries who met him, and never came into his presence without feeling strongly his integrity, his lofty and gentle purity. But I am taking it for granted that any readers of this book will already have read the poetry of these two men.

determination to find romance and beauty in all the doings and speech of these people; his *a priori* belief that the basic virtues of life are to be found among the simplest and most rustic men and women, those who live closest to nature and whose lives are in rhythm with the elementary evolutions of growth and decay, and the change of seasons.

This determination of Wordsworth's was perilously close to the sentimental Eighteenth Century notion that savagery was identical with godliness, and it resulted in much very bad verse. But the real end of his poetry was a far wider and greater aim, the only one worthy of a poet with a moral purpose—the excitation in other minds of emotions significant of a high destiny of the spirit; the arousing in all his readers of “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature,” and the constant rediscovery in all the phenomena of time and place of “what is really important to men.” When he forgot his avowed means in serving his end, he gave us imperishable poetry; when he was conscious of his means alone, he wrote badly but he at least was doing homage to the ideals of his youth.

Wordsworth and Shelley (to say nothing of Coleridge and Keats) effected the real work poetry had to do; they united faith and knowledge, reason and passion. They learned in deep suffering the fallacies of rational religion, and went straight back, or on, to the religion and morality of love. Their world might scoff at Christianity, but they saw that that world had never grown up to the principle upon which it was founded and from which it sprang:

One moment now may give us more
Than fifty years of reason:
Our minds shall drink at every pore
The spirit of the season.

.
And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above,
We'll frame the measure of our souls:
They shall be turned to love.

Through wood and stream and field and hill and Ocean
 A quickening life from the Earth's heart has burst
 As it has ever done, with change and motion,
 From the great morning of the world when first
 God dawned on Chaos; in its stream immersed,
 The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light;
 All baser things pant with life's sacred thirst;
 Diffuse themselves; and spend in love's delight,
 The beauty and the joy of their renew'd light.

The Light whose smile kindles the Universe,
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,
 That Benediction which the eclipsing curse
 Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love
 Which through the web of being blindly wove
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
 The fire for which all thirst; now beams on me
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

Both these poets were in the harassing position of being out of step with the world around them whenever they were most harmoniously apprehending the real problems of life in that world. England at this time was sick and unhappy. Misery abounded, and the whole country, to the bones of its institutions and inhabitants, was suffering from war; from the failures of a great experiment in which was involved the integrity of scientific faith; from the social disorders which intensified as the industrial revolution embraced more and more of a world which had grown out of very different conditions; and also from the fact that England had fled, frightened, back to the worship of the false idols she had really outgrown. It is no wonder that the sensitive minds of the period were at odds with such a world, for it requires qualities rarer and more powerful than sensitiveness to reconcile living and life, to recognise steadily the variegated horrors and joys of the one, and some essential and related meaning (if it be only a consistent unmeaning) in the other. With the loss of an uncompromising

and inclusive faith in the purpose and trend of life, the sensitive mind is the prey of unreason and passion, which combined produce sentimentality—and so we find practically every poet since Milton a victim at moments of this mental disease, speaking under the momentary compulsion of believing as universal some mood or quality borrowed from a transient emotional state. And because for over a hundred years no voice (except the lost voice of Blake) had affirmed the unchanging poetic truths, a generation of great poets found themselves in a world which gave them no premises for belief, for action, or for thought. Each one had to puzzle the thing out for himself, and in essentials their agreement is amazing.

I think we can learn more of this adjustment from Shelley than from Wordsworth. The latter aspired to, and learned

A homely sympathy that heeds
The common life our nature breeds;
A wisdom fitted to the needs
Of hearts at leisure.

But Shelley, although he practised this “homely sympathy” in his actual life, tirelessly, with unbounded and simple generosity, sought, in the deep aspirations which found voice in his poetry, a more immediate wisdom—a wisdom fitted to the needs of hearts in torment. He was the child of a more modern generation; he made incessant pilgrimage through the philosophies of six languages, and tested for himself, in the world of action, all the salvation-philosophies of reason and science. He had, in the end, to go behind these theories to the basic principles, before his vision could pierce beyond the “dome of many-coloured glass” to “the white radiance of Eternity.” But in effecting this he recapitulated the spiritual history of the scientific world, and went through all the phases through which most intelligent people must struggle to-day; and so when he finally did withdraw to poetry he carried with him more of the apparently irreconcilable elements from the

world about him than did any of his contemporaries. He was of our age, too, in that he could never rest with the attainment of an inner harmony which did not in its conception embrace all men. He had that social conscience which few of us to-day are without, and it is significant that he learned, in the course of time, a philosophy in which that social conscience and his own desires were at one; identified and yet free of the limitations which might have anchored them to any particular moment in time.

7

Not to acquire cold notions—lifeless technical rules—but living and life-producing ideas, *which shall contain their own evidence*, the certainty that they are essentially one with the germinal essences in nature—his consciousness being the focus and mirror of both—for this does the artist for a time abandon the external real in order to return to it with a complete sympathy with its internal and actual. . . . You must master the essence . . . which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man . . . *to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature.*—COLERIDGE, "On Poesy or Art." (Italics mine.)

There is a vein of mysticism here which may make these words meaningless to some people. They were addressed to all poets, and they have a most peculiar applicability to Shelley, who practised in his early verses "mere painful copying," producing "masks only, not forms breathing life"; who then abandoned the "external real" for the world of action and ideas (in the non-platonic sense of the word) and when he had acquired most painfully a harmony of thought and feeling which gave him an unerring single vision, returned to the natural world and found that nature was thought, that thought was nature.

For had Shelley, one is tempted to think, been a less supreme poet, he would probably have been no poet at all. One cannot conceive of him as a minor figure in a literary world. He was in more ways than one a man of action, filled with an in-

exhaustible energy, and showing clearly even in his mistakes his inner compulsion to see life as a vastly serious affair, to seek in it always a moral purpose, in the most comprehensive sense of the word "moral." He was never a poet, never conceived of poetry as his own *métier*, until he had tested for himself the more immediate methods of applying moral ideas to life—the methods of the politician, the pamphleteer, the reformer—and even after these tendencies in him had merged into a more inclusive purpose, he did not in the usual "romantic" sense attempt to escape reality by means of the strangely carven, vast cosmos he bodied forth. He did not even entirely change his mind as to what constitutes reality. It is true that in his moments of greatest vision, when he was "speaking more than he knew," he saw that

. . . this whole
Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers,
With all the silent or tempestuous workings
By which they have been, are, or cease to be,
Is but a vision;—all that it inherits
Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles, and dreams;
Thought is its cradle and its grave, nor less
The Future and the Past are idle shadows
Of thought's eternal flight—they have no being:
Nought is but that which feels itself to be.

But this platonic conception was not a constant conviction. It was a late and mature synthesis, and perhaps had he lived it might in time have permeated and transformed those other conceptions so native to his spirit and to his age—those eager visions of man, with his possibilities of soul and mind, reconciled to the hostile world about him.

It is idle, however, to speculate about what Shelley might have been, when he left us a world we can never finish exploring. But it is necessary to understand how practical, how almost utilitarian, his emotions were, before one can attempt to understand how wide the discipline, and how keen and

forceful the intellect, he willed upon his emotions; how full of suggestion for us is the poetry which resulted from this fusion. If Shelley had been indeed the mystical dreamer, the "poetic" youth, the sentimental weaver of pretty Utopias which he has often been represented, he would have little to say to a generation which has been demoted by Evolution, and bound where it must stare always at the discouraging face of History. A dreamer of idle and pretty dreams Shelley never was. Natively, in fact, he was more inclined to nightmares, for he was endowed with a relentlessly enquiring mind and a hypersensitiveness which usually eluded self-pity but which could never elude the wider pity imposed upon him by his imagination.

It was his eager mind that first led him off his destined course, and kept him wandering until he was twenty-three years old. The world he inherited with his name was still largely of the Eighteenth Century—or rather, it had turned from the new world threatening its existence, in an attempt to recover the comforting Eighteenth Century spirit of "nothing too much." At home, at school, at the university, he found people who believed in nothing very strongly but who held opinions with dogmatic stubbornness; he found the still pervasive heritage of the Age of Reason and Respectability. Mrs. Campbell describes Shelley's world as being one of "Petty, but persevering tyranny; coarseness of word and deed, an utter cynicism which cultivated prejudice as a protestation against anarchy, and enforced religion, not as a moral support, but as the prop of materialistic respectability; a society without ideals, moved only by the fear of liberty, and the passion of unreason."¹

In such an atmosphere, of course, any boy of Shelley's tem-

¹ *Shelley and the Unromantics*, by Mrs. Olwen Ward Campbell, 74. I cannot possibly express in detail and in separate footnotes my indebtedness to Mrs. Campbell, and I should like here to make a wholesale acknowledgment. *Shelley and the Unromantics* is critically the most penetrating study of Shelley's life and poetry I have ever read.

perament (even one with a less degree of honesty and a less inherent delicacy of mind) would have rebelled, and Shelley, who was destined to "invest philosophy with passion," whose mind and emotions were both formed to outsoar impatiently any bounds dictated by fear of consequences, who was practically never motivated by self-interest—Shelley very naturally "learnt revolt before he learnt faith." As is so often the case, his intellect found its first food in whatever was at hand. He gave alternate allegiance to the most variegated systems of thought, and his most impressionable years were devoted to an attempt to base his life upon, and direct his emotions by, that religion of Reason which had helped produce the very barrenness he was trying to escape.

He recapitulated, in fact, most of the stages of development through which the world of thought had progressed from the time of Newton through Coleridge, and since we are all still under the necessity of choosing between materialism, idealism, and agnosticism, most intelligent people to-day go through a corresponding progression of allegiance. Shelley had, in addition to an adventurous mind, a horror of injustice and tyranny which amounted to a passion and dominated all his life and thought. This quality, as we have seen, was so native to his day (not at all, however, to his *milieu*), it was so in the air he breathed, that it is impossible to try to trace it to its germ, although in view of its unwearying strength in Shelley, it seems certain that it was integral to his whole temperament. The inherent personal dislike must be postulated; following this, his early studies of the revolutionary philosophies augmented and widened the dislike, giving it a political and social significance, while the almost disastrous tyranny to which he was so long subject, added further passion to the conviction; and during his last years, when he was free to devote himself to poetry, the hatred of oppression became the cornerstone of his mature philosophy. It is not too much to say that this quality in Shelley dictated the trend of all his development,

and that because of this unifying characteristic there was never an unhinging break of continuity in a growth which at first sight might seem spasmodic and indicative of a faith too lightly given.

There was, first, the rigidly orthodox, but half-hearted Christianity which oppressed his spirit in childhood; for Christianity, as professed and practised by Sir Timothy Shelley—to cite only one of Percy's preceptors and living examples—was the fearful and wonderful blend of sentimentalism and affirmation divorced from thought or practice, which we often find to-day. To a deeply religious nature such as Shelley's, this hypocrisy, this prostitution of the spirit to worldly uses, was blasphemy, and the immediate effect was one with which most of us are familiar in our own lives—the blasphemy became identified in his mind with the system which it sinned against, and priests and churches became for a time demoniacal symbols of a great social lie, a conspiracy of oppression. His admiration, therefore, for Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the whole French materialistic school was the result rather than the cause of his early hatred of organised religion. But the philosophy did fan the emotions to a raging flame, and although it is natural that he had to discipline his intellect with materialism—had to argue and think and reason in tune with his emotions—before his mind developed to the point where experience and maturity could show him the logical objections to the system—although it was inevitable that he should only have emerged from materialism through absorbing it and proving for himself its inadequacy, it is nevertheless certain that he was never at home in a purely sceptical atmosphere; never truly himself until he learned to see the truth behind the erring structure, and abandoned forever his somewhat hysterical attempt to practise a gospel of love through hatred. The truth is, of course, that Shelley was essentially a Christian. His very unbelief was the reverse side of an ingrained faith,

and there was never a time when he really lost faith in that spark of divinity in man which we call the soul.

One learns much from following Shelley through those years when he was trying to reduce his intuitive knowledge to the Eighteenth Century doctrine of Reason. He was altogether out of his element; floundering in thought and action; cut off from his native light:

There was drawn an adamantine veil
Between his heart and mind—both unrelieved
Wrought in his brain and bosom separate strife.

Shelley's theme was always Humanity, and materialistic scepticism reduced the spirit of man to the unimportance of a maggot. His native element was light and sea and "the music of the living grass and air," but the religion of Reason made of Nature a barren metaphysical entity and denied that communion of the "external" and the "internal" from which he was later to draw his purest pleasure and inspiration. His need was for a God (or, what is the same thing, a moral meaning behind life and death) and he was logically forced to accept Necessity. The severance of his common sense and his great native wisdom, caused by the attempt to subject himself to the dictates of Reason, was such that his public activities and the decisions of his private life were almost always wrong activities and decisions. They were, of course, conscientious and consistent and high-minded from his adopted point of view, but wrong entirely from the standpoint of his own intuitive bent. Thus we see a Shelley who would only allow himself to make casual use of verse to supplement his pamphleteering, his lecturing, his crusades so solemnly carried out by means of balloons and bottles cast out to sea and the dropping of leaflets on to the heads of the Irish populace; a Shelley who managed to entangle all his relationships with people and institutions, to impair permanently his health, and to bring on himself great suffering.

And yet, it would be rash and unadvised to consider those years wasted. "It happens, most naturally of course, that those who undergo the shock of spiritual or intellectual change sometimes fail to recognise their debt to the deserted cause: How much of the heroism, or other high quality, of their rejection has really been the product of what they reject."¹ Shelley must have taken into his youthful revolt some early intimations of immortality. Certainly he took into it (or was ushered into it by) his fearless honesty and his "martyr's love" of truth, his belief in the perfectibility of man, his need for a religion which would leave to men the dignity of distinguishing for themselves between good and evil, his horror of injustice, and his desire to reconcile man and nature. And although he followed these beliefs under a wrong star, there is no doubt that they were all strengthened and enriched, after the strange fashion of genius, during the course of the erratic voyage. Before he finally abandoned the premises of materialism, he had acquired from what he was to reject, a disciplined mind, trained and grounded in philosophy. He had tested ideas, read enormously, and followed the trends of man's thought through the ages which preceded his own. He had freed himself of that narrow conception of an anthropomorphic God which had seemed at first to impose upon him the necessity of atheism. He had quickened to the romantic facts of science, and he had learned to think for himself. Learning to think for himself, indeed, meant learning to think his way out of that which had taught him to think, but by the time his natural idealism was free to assert itself, he could embrace it without self-deception or sentimentalism; he could inform his thought with the mysticism native to his spirit, without danger of sinking into a soft bed of meaningless abstractions. In other words, Shelley escaped the predicaments into which the sensitively organised man of to-day so often falls, on the one hand, of yielding to a logic of the mind which confines his in-

¹ Walter Pater, *Gaston de la Tour*.

tuitions within the iron cage of our most imperfect factual knowledge; on the other, of yielding to an emotional belief which, however right it may in the end prove to be, is really sentimental in that it has not been arrived at with full purpose, ordered by thought, purified by doubt. He escaped the modern compromise of agnosticism (in an age, one must admit, when it was slightly easier to escape), and he effected the Miltonic synthesis of Reason and Passion.

Shelley is often accused of windy verbiage, of "descriptions that do not describe," of cosmic trivialities, of a sentimental determination to prove man perfect (or immediately perfectible), to see all power as a hideous blot somehow spilled on the world by an external accident. It is true that before he began to write poetry, and occasionally before he began writing his best poetry, he did incline to an optimism which was only the balance of pessimism; and all his life he was subject to occasional moods which got themselves expressed in varying forms of goodness and badness, in varying equation to his deepest convictions. The gloomy words of Enoch Soames hold that he was "uneven"—and what poet is not? But there is a voluminous contradictory evidence for these accusations. It requires, indeed, a "somewhat abnormal visual imagination" to participate fully in his poetry, and a careful attention to the inner music which in his best work is so magically one with his outer music. The perfection of sound may steal upon the casual reader and lull him into a state of mind which reduces soaring words to windy verbiage. Shelley's descriptions, too, are rather suggestive than destined for photographic clearness, by reason of his greatest poetic power, that of apprehending the essence of thought and objective beauty in one conception, so that, as Mrs. Campbell has said, his landscapes "are like things beheld in a dream"—where an indefinable emotional significance pervades all objects—"we hardly know whether it is with the eye or the ear or the touch that we ap-

prehend them.”¹ Shelley himself called these scenes the “visions which impersonate my own apprehension of the beautiful and the just,” and his visions are usually so compact of imagery and ideas that they require for appreciation, as does all great poetry, a sixth sense of the mind; an intuitive perception. They speak to us as Demogorgon spoke: with “an universal sound like words.”

Again, Shelley was not concerned with nature as an objective phenomenon. He was a philosophic poet, who sought Intellectual Beauty:

Thou—that to human thought art nourishment
Like darkness to a dying flame!

and for him the mystery of thought was the substance, and the earth he loved the shadow, of that meaning he sought so tirelessly through the “doubt, chance and mutability” of life. From the sensible world he took forms for the bodiless ideas of the invisible world:

Enough of incommunicable dream,
And twilight phantasm, and deep noon-day thought,
Has shone within me, that serenely now . . .
I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
May modulate with murmurs of the air,
And motions of the forests and the sea,
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.

As to the complaints of Shelley’s supposedly superficial Utopianism, the best reply will be an examination of the “Prometheus Unbound.” Opinions may differ as to its poetic perfection, but the fact that Shelley considered it the best of all his work, and was better satisfied with it than with anything else he wrote, entitles it to stand as a justification of his philosophy and his cosmos. The quality of the poetry certainly proves Shelley a philosophic poet, and not at all a poetic phi-

¹ *Shelley and the Unromantics*, 195.

losopher, and however stimulating the thought-content, the fusion of that thought into poetry upholds him in his own statement that "it is a mistake to suppose that I dedicate my poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform, or that I consider them in any degree as containing a reasoned system on the theory of human life. Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and supererogatory in verse."¹ The integrity of all that has been said in these pages rests to some extent on those lines, and I should like to compare a prose statement² in which Shelley expressed the *reasonable foundation* for his later beliefs, and then see what this statement became in poetry, which never controverts the limitations of reason, but rises up from its logic into a world where anything that is not palpably untrue may fulfil Truth itself. In this way we may determine if the vast universe which Shelley conjured "out of the lampless caves of unimagined being" does not stand unshaken against the winds of dialectic, and we may at the same time test those accusations against him as a poet who would not face the realities of human limitation and imperfection.

The prose fragment would, I think, be perfectly acceptable to the most confirmed sceptic:

But I was discontented with such a view of things as it (i.e., materialism) afforded; man is a being of high aspirations, "looking both before and after," whose "thoughts wander through eternity," disclaiming alliance with transience and decay; incapable of imagining to himself annihilation; existing but in the future and the past; being, not what he is, but what he has been and shall be. *Whatever may be his true and final destination, there is a spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution.*

(Italics mine.)

In the "Prometheus Unbound" there is a whole cosmic system resting upon this frail but tough fibre of intuition. In this

¹ "Prometheus Unbound," Preface.

² "Fragment on Life," quoted on p. 281 of *Shelley and the Unromantics*.

cosmos there is a moral meaning, an account rendered with good and evil, and a most reverent shrine built to the mystery that ultimately blocks all thought—a being, or a god, or an idea. This mystery was anxiously left unrationalised by Shelley, who was eager above all things to keep his deity free of the anthropomorphic qualities which in the past had led men to dictate dogmatically “the will of God.” For this dictated will not only links up with the reward-and-punishment theory so hateful to any one for whom virtue is a beautiful thing-in-itself, but it begins at the wrong end, demanding actions which do not spring naturally from an ordered loveliness of the spirit; it “bids a creature fly whose very sorrow is that time hath shorn his natural wings.” Shelley’s conception of virtue was “in acting well, in contempt of present advantage,” and acting well (to quote Mrs. Campbell again), “he felt to be the expression of life, a natural and joyous expression; and evil”—resolvable into wilful injury—“the result of torpor” (p. 294).

Man, in the “Prometheus,” is

. . . a many-sided mirror
Which could distort to many a shape of error
This true fair world of things.

And among men:

The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want; worse need for them.
The wise want love; and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.

Prometheus is the soul of man, that “visitation of divinity” which “redeems from decay.” He is the “spirit within him at enmity with nothingness and dissolution,” and thus he is Love, the saviour of mankind. Jupiter is not, as many interpreters claim, an external tyranny imposed upon mankind, but the sterile principle of Evil, inherent in the universe and in man,

and able to chain into impotence, to torture, the principle of good; but not in any way capable of destroying it:

. . . these fatal shapes, abhorred by God and Man,
Which under many a name and many a form,
Strange, savage, ghastly, dark, and execrable,
Were Jupiter, the tyrant of the world.

The overthrow of Jupiter occurs automatically with the appearance of Demogorgon.

JUPITER: Awful shape, what art thou? Speak!

DEMOGORGON: Eternity. Demand no direr name.

Descend, and follow me down the abyss.

I am thy child, as thou wert Saturn's child;

Mightier than thee; and we must dwell together

Henceforth in darkness.

In other words, Time is coexistent with Evil; and Love, which is not subject to the accidents of Time, is freed by Eternity. When Love is liberated from Evil, man is

Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man
Passionless?—no, yet free from guilt or pain,
Which were, for his will made and suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance, and death, and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended heaven. . . .

And so when man becomes "one harmonious soul of many a soul, whose nature is its own divine control," Prometheus, the symbol of that corporate soul, is united with Asia, who is "the shadow of beauty unbeheld."¹

¹ This was a most vital conception to Shelley, who suffered even more than most poets from the impossibility of a complete communion with beauty—whether it be the beauty of earth or the beauty of the soul or ideas, or, as it often seems elusively to be, a principle of beauty which unites the two in an almost tangible mood of the mind. It was this "shadow of beauty unbeheld" for which the poet in "Alastor" was searching. "I think one is always in love

But, Asia asks Demogorgon, if Jupiter is a slave, and ruler only in the world of men, "who is the master of the slave?"

DEMOGORGON:

If the abysm
Could vomit forth its secrets. . . . But a voice
Is wanting, *the deep truth is imageless*; . . .

ASIA: So much I asked before, and my heart gave
The response thou hast given; and of such truths
Each to itself must be the oracle.

(Italics mine.)

Naturally if this philosophy were useful in the ordinary sense of the word, it would be poetically useless. If it were ingenious it would be detestable and equally useless as poetry. Its extraordinary virtue lies, I think, in the fact that with no current religious terminology to reinterpret, no sound basis of thought in the world about him to lend him its universality, Shelley could have written a profoundly religious and moral poem; that he should have merged all the best of his age into a conception which had already embodied most of the best of another and so different age, and have produced a philosophical poem which is almost at no moment separable into either pure philosophy or what is sometimes, misleadingly, called "pure poetry." It is of course at times predominantly lyrical, but Shelley's best lyrics are always deeply rooted in thought, and in his many great moments the outer and inner music are so merged, the thought-content is so musical in itself, that one is inclined to take it for granted as a gift for the ear:

And then I changed my pipings.
Singing how down the vale of Mænalus
I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed.
Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!
It breaks in our bosom and then we bleed:

with something or other"; Shelley wrote in a letter, "the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in the flesh and blood to avoid it, lies in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of that which is perhaps eternal." *Orphan Angel*, by Elinor Wylie, is an hypothetical record of Shelley's quest for this "mortal image," and says more essential truth of Shelley in its fictions than is usually done in volumes of biography.

All wept, as I think both ye now would
 If envy or age had not frozen your blood,
 At the sorrow of my sweet pipings.
 —"Hymn of Pan."

And the Alps, whose snows are spread
 High between the clouds and sun;
 And of living things each one;
 And my spirit which so long
 Darkened this swift stream of song,
 Interpenetrated lie
 By the glory of the sky:
 Be it love, light, harmony,
 Odour, or the soul of all
 Which from Heaven like dew doth fall,
 Or the mind which feeds this verse
 Peopling the lonely universe.
 —"Euganean Hills."

 . . . Its home
 The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
 Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
 Over the snow. The secret strength of things
 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
 Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 If to the human mind's imaginings
 Silence and solitude were vacancy?
 —"Mont Blanc."

Lamp of Earth! where'er thou movest
 Its dim shapes are clad with brightness,
 And the souls of whom thou lovest
 Walk upon the winds with lightness,
 Till they fail, as I am failing,
 Dizzy, lost, yet unbewailing.
 —"Prometheus."

They are all so crystal clear in surface meaning; but the deeper meaning, as always in poetry, goes further into the mind than belief or disbelief—it speaks to that part of the mind where

affirmation is as emphatic as denial, since only the "quick dreams and passion-winged ministers of thought" can enter there, can make their way from "kindling brain to kindling brain" and speak "what none yet knew, or can be known."

Shelley is the most modern of those English poets whose claim to the title is undisputed (for I believe that Matthew Arnold has been denied that title). The degrees of poetic greatness are for the individual to decide, but I think it is unquestionable that, apart from the essential poetic truth which speaks to us as lucidly in Homer and Dante and Milton as it could in a Twentieth Century Shakespeare if we had him—apart from this deepest speech, Shelley succeeded and failed in exactly the same spheres in which lie our own successes and failures. He at first plunged into a scientific conception of life, as do so many of us:

Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power,
Necessity! thou mother of the world!
Unlike the God of human error, thou
Requir'st no prayers or praises; the caprice
Of man's weak will belongs no more to thee
Than do the changeful passions of his breast. . . .
No atom of this turbulence fulfills
A vague and unnecessitated task,
Or acts but as it must and ought to act.
—"Queen Mab."

Which is not so pleasant as the rapt Oxford Ode, quoted by Coleridge:

Inoculation! heavenly maid, descend!

but it is just as little poetry, as would be any attempt to dig deeply into the thin-strewn surfaces of the mind. On the other hand, Shelley was passionately interested in science, and found his imagination excited and stirred by its vast hypotheses and attempts at unification. The material of science is as much the stuff of poetry as anything else we can see or think or hear or feel. It is only when the poet makes *causes* rather than

meanings the object of his desires that he ceases automatically to be a poet, and becomes a scientist or a philosopher.

Glorious shapes have life in thee,
Earth, and all earth's company;
 Living globes which ever throng
The deep chasms and wildernesses;
 And green worlds that glide along;
And swift stars with flashing tresses;
 And icy moons most cold and bright,
 And mighty suns beyond the night,
 Atoms of intensest light.

—"Hellas."

That is the transmutation of science into poetry; a transmutation all poets of the future will probably make, if they are capable first of seeing beyond the barriers of materialism.

Most of the other modern qualities in Shelley have been at least suggested above. His conception of Time as the enemy of human endeavour has interesting analogies with certain modern philosophic efforts to make Eternity apprehendable. He was, as we are, whether we know it or not, all his life in search of a religion incorporating the best of all thought and all knowledge in an Idea comprehensive enough to leave the spirit breathing-space; an idea which would not offend the individual's intuitive knowledge of his own good by a system of ethics, and which would also lend a more than immediate significance to his own fervid socialism. He was depressed as is the modern world by the then embryonic confusions of industrialism, and when he could not transcend his resentment of it he was (being incapable of anything so negative as satire) stirred into writing very bad verse. His pity for men caught in a world like ours, where cruel use was made of new knowledge and where a stupid adherence was given to outgrown knowledge, led him often into a glorification of the weakness of man, although his happiest inheritance was a strong faith in man's ultimate strength.

It is because Shelley was faced with most of our problems, and because, despite his intense joy in living, he suffered such anguish from the "dark reality" of life; because he was a most intractable individualist and so possessed of a deep social conscience—it is for all these reasons that he is significant in any consideration of the inextricable progression of time and corporate thought, and of the lonely mind which is made by and makes these changes, which maintains continuity, and keeps open those fields of the spirit where all that is new has roots in all that is unchanging.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
To defy power; which seems omnipotent;
To love and bear; to hope till Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free:
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Chapter Six

A DARKLING PLAIN

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

I

Although the Victorian period would probably have existed unimpaired though Queen Victoria had never lived, it is none the less fitting that the age should be named after her, because her reign almost exactly synchronised with a clearly defined epoch in English civilisation and history. Victoria came to the throne in 1837, five years after the passage of the first Reform Bill. It was by means of the Reform Bill that the spirit of Victorianism had first found notable expression, and this spirit remained the dominant force in English life until after 1884, when it began to break. However, it did not give way entirely, but continued to exist side by side with a new spirit until somewhere around the turn of the century. (Gladstone's fourth ministry, for example, ended in 1894, while Meredith's *The Amazing Marriage* appeared in 1895.) And with the turn of the century, Queen Victoria died.

During the period in which Victorianism was supreme in England, England may be said to have been supreme in the white man's world. She was the richest of nations, and therefore the most powerful; and she was the most productive of nations, both in the world of the spirit and in the world of science. Also, that same half-century was the period during which our contemporary world was formed. The most insistent problems which confront us to-day—such problems as democracy, triumphant industrialism, agricultural decline, the

new imperialism, the fall in prestige of organised religion—first became of threatening importance during those years. It is of no slight interest, then, to understand the spirit which guided such a country as England during such a period as the Victorian Age. Before attempting to define Victorianism, it is necessary to consider, in isolation, some of the forces which underlay it.

Most important of all these forces is the industrial revolution, with its manifold influences. As has been said, this movement began inconspicuously in the early Eighteenth Century, first becoming noticeable in England about 1770. From then on, it gathered force and speed, and by the time of the Napoleonic wars England was already half transformed. Due to the distraction of that external crisis, however, and to the artificial economic and social conditions which a long war always produces, it was not until after the fall of Napoleon that England was forced to take official notice of her changing circumstances.

The industrial revolution resulted from the application of science to the purposes of business. The new science had to precede any such revolution, and the Seventeenth Century supplied that science. Then men began to make practical, mechanical use of what other men had learned; a steam engine was devised to pump water out of a well; a new period in human history had begun. With the application to industry of the new machines and the new sources of power, the factory system was produced; with the factory system came the factory town, and riches on a new magnificent scale for the middle class. These princes of finance soon gained control of their country's government. Meanwhile a new and rapidly breeding class of poor people was created—people who were neither farm labourers nor artisans, but who tended other men's machinery. This proletariat class lived in the cities, and was easily reached by cheap papers and pamphlets, which the use of steam power for the printing press had made possible. So

an elementary education for the masses became the next stage in the revolution, and once the masses had learned to read they naturally demanded political rights; therefore, some form of, or pretence at, democracy, was the last and most far-reaching of all the results of machine industrialism. These phases of the great change which I have summarised—new wealth for the middle class, plutocracy, a new type of working-class, growth of towns, increase in population, spread of education, demand for political democracy—these phases were experienced, during the Nineteenth Century, by all the countries which became industrialised.

In England, where the process began, there was no previous experience to work on, and each new stage was stumbled into blindly. And in England the changes and readjustments were made especially difficult for the poor by the fact that during the very years when the industrial revolution was developing, England was undergoing an agrarian revolution which resulted in dispossessing and pauperising thousands of farmers and in abolishing the vestiges of the medieval system of tilling the soil. This change was probably inevitable, but it was accomplished in the worst possible way and at a time so tragically bad that it is hard to understand how England avoided a revolution on the French model.

What happened can be most clearly explained by considering the lot of a small English farmer and his family in 1770, and of a similar group thirty years later. At the earlier date, the farmer lived in his cottage, in the midst of his own garden, and worked his two or three strips of land on the "open field" which surrounded the village.¹ Beyond the "open field" lay the common, where the farmer pastured his cow and his pigs. The farmer's wife wove cloth, and his children, as soon as they were old enough, did the same, when they were not working in the fields. The weaving was done on contract for a cloth

¹ In parts of England, this "open field system" had disappeared long before 1770, but in most places it still survived.

merchant in the nearest town. By means of all this labour, the farmer and his family subsisted, neither in comfort nor in acute want, unless there came a year when the village crops failed. . . . Thirty years later, when the industrial and the agricultural revolutions had afflicted the land, what was the life of such a farmer? The new mills had abolished the cottage industries, so his wife and children could no longer earn money by weaving at home; the "open field"—which was a wasteful system, and which made it almost impossible to introduce improvements—had been "enclosed" into a large farm, and for his two or three strips of land the farmer had received a money compensation which was not large enough to enable him to set up by himself under the new conditions. So the man had taken a job as a day labourer on one of the big new farms, where he was paid wages on which he almost starved, and on which his wife and children would have starved quite literally had they not lived as paupers on the parish "rates." This indignity disgusted them, for they had been nurtured in a freer England, so the wife and children moved to the nearest factory town, where they worked in filthy surroundings for fourteen hours a day, thus earning enough to live in extreme discomfort and want. . . . Such was England at the opening of the Nineteenth Century, and such she still was at the accession of Queen Victoria—an England richer than she had ever been before, and at the same time poorer than France under the *ancien régime*.

The French Revolution was another of the forces which helped to create Victorian England. For however little the French Revolution might seem to have accomplished, to the eyes of the disappointed enthusiasts of that day, it had at least given superb publicity to a number of ideas which, once liberated, could never again be chained: equality before the law, as opposed to special privilege; freedom of opinion and of the press; democracy. Only the first of these had been attained, even in France, by the Revolution; but the others had

been made a part of men's political ideals, and no rulers anywhere west of Russia could quite ignore them. In England, in the years immediately following the fall of Napoleon, the demand for all three of these things became insistent, and some notice had to be taken of it. In 1828 and 1829, equality was advanced by the repeal of the laws imposing political liabilities upon non-Anglicans; and by that time a considerable amount of freedom for the press had been secured. The question of democracy remained. How would it be dealt with by England's aristocracy, by the descendants of the few dozen families who, in fact, had run the country for more than a hundred years? The method which they chose gives the keynote for the Victorian Age, in politics, morals, art.

They might have attempted to resist all change, as the House of Lords wished to do; that would probably have led to a violent revolution and a general overturning. They might have given in to the extreme demands of democracy; that would have meant abdicating and handing the Empire over to a group without experience or tradition in governing. They chose—or, more properly speaking, they blundered into—a compromise which made possible the maintenance of continuity in government while democracy grew up alongside of aristocracy and finally superseded it.¹ This compromise is given expression in the Reform Bill of 1832, whereby the new rich business men were allowed to share power with the old rich landowners. From this time on, although the time-honoured families continued to put their young men into Parliament, and although many of the names of Cabinet officers had a reassuring Eighteenth Century flavour, the new business men could always have their way if they cared to press hard.

¹ When I use the word "democracy," I mean merely a representative government in which all, or nearly all, the adult males have the vote. That such a state, even when the adult females are added to the electorate, need not be a democracy in the etymological sense of the word, is a discovery of the Twentieth Century. Victorian England confidently believed that once the franchise became universal "the people" would run affairs to suit themselves.

This was shown in 1846, when they forced the repeal of the tariff on grain, a tariff which was immensely to the advantage of the aristocratic landlord, but to the disadvantage of the factory-owner, since it kept up the price of food and hence the level of wages.

So the rich business man could have his way, after 1832; but for the most part his way did not conflict very sharply with that of the old ruling families. Hence the two groups were able to co-operate against the abhorred menace of "American democracy," as the demands for further extension of the franchise came to be called. By 1884 these demands had been so far acceded to that almost all men in England had the vote; yet the business-rich and the land-rich together continued their rule, because they were possessed not only of money—the source of power—but of prestige and of experience. When finally their grip was broken, when, at the beginning of the next century, the English government passed a series of laws which sacrificed the immediate welfare of these two classes in the interests of the common people, Victorianism was dead. For the essence of the Victorian spirit lay in this compromise between aristocracy and democracy, this adjustment between tradition and innovation, which allowed the new to grow up but which temporarily preserved most of the advantages of the old. Mr. Trevelyan, in a somewhat too complimentary description of Victorianism, writes as follows:

The difference from former times was that these specially trained leaders [i.e., men like Peel, Huskisson, Russell] now felt responsibility to the great public rather than to their own class, whose prejudices and monopolies they were often prepared to sacrifice to the general welfare. The eighteenth century aristocrats and the anti-Jacobin Tories had been the masters of the public, and sometimes therefore its robbers and tyrants. Peel and his successors were its servants. But they were not demagogues, because they still felt themselves to belong to a high and austere sect, devoted to the science of government. Part of that science was to keep in touch with the changes of public opinion—but it was by no means all.

This flattering picture would probably be a just one if the English ruling class had actually regarded itself as "a high and austere sect, devoted to the science of government." The phrase describes Peel accurately enough; but what of his contemporary, Palmerston? Viscount Palmerston was another scion of the old oligarchy; he became Secretary at War in 1809, and held high office most of the time from then until his death, while Prime Minister, in 1865. If Peel and Grey and Russell show Victorianism at its best in politics, making a precarious but much-needed adjustment between the old order and the new, then Palmerston shows Victorianism on its seamy side. For he is, in his cheerful and engaging fashion, a combination of the worst features of aristocracy and of democracy. Put into office at the age of twenty-five because of his family connections and in spite of his lack of training and of his levity, he lived to be one of the first demagogues of the new democracy, one of the first to discover that an exciting foreign policy, punctuated occasionally by not-too-difficult wars, will keep any minister in popularity.

Such, at any rate, was the Victorian spirit as it showed itself in politics. Though it produced a Palmerston, and though it proved itself unable to cope with the horror of factory conditions through the first two-thirds of the century, still it did also have the advantages which Mr. Trevelyan emphasises. And probably those advantages are its salient aspect. . . . I have laboured this point, because the issues in politics are simpler and more superficial than the issues in art, and therefore the adjustment which is Victorianism can be more easily detected in that field. But the same adjustment was being sought in art and in religion, and everywhere the conflicting forces were similar—tradition on the one hand, and on the other a set of ideas derived either from the French Revolution, or from science and industrialism, or from both.

In the sphere of religion, the conflict was particularly tense, and to thoughtful contemporaries this may have seemed the

most important issue of the age. The Eighteenth Century had seen religion materialised and made worldly and "scientific." This naturally led to a genteel and polished scepticism, both within the Church and without, and this in turn gave way to a revival of faith in spiritual truth, a revival which manifested itself in such dissimilar movements as Methodism, romanticism, and the philosophy of Kant. By the end of the Eighteenth Century, then, it was fairly well established that men would not yet attempt to live a purely scientific, despiritualised existence. However, this did not at all imply that men would continue to adhere to any of the organised forms of Christianity. Many of the great romantics, and of the followers of Kant, did not belong to any church, though they were deeply religious men. But such non-conformity, among the educated classes, had been a normal state of affairs since the break-up of the medieval church, and it attracted little comment. During Victoria's reign, however, the religious question entered upon an entirely new phase, a phase which was precipitated by science and the industrial revolution. One of the by-products of the latter, as I have said before, was the spread of education; and by 1860 this had made itself felt in England throughout the lower middle class, and was even affecting the workingmen. Along with this spread in education—in fact, one of the chief causes thereof—came cheap books and pamphlets; and these too had become generally available by the second half of the century. So by that time a large and hitherto undisturbed public was in a position to receive new ideas. Meanwhile, science had been preparing the new ideas; for in the field of paleontology and biology a number of discoveries were being made which showed that the Biblical account of the world's physical history was not literally true. During the decade of the sixties, this information began to circulate among the new reading public, and the dilemma which was thus presented caused, among this public, a most unhappy disturbance. The dilemma was simple: if the claims of science

were correct, what could be made of the religious claim that the Bible was an inspired text? Why, in other words, should the Almighty inspire his prophets with misinformation? The confusion which followed, and the bitter controversies which arose, were chiefly due to the inexcusable stand taken by most religious leaders, who were content to deny the truth of science's findings. This was not only bad tactics, it was a shameful mistake for any one with spiritual pretensions, because it seemed to admit that the truth of Christianity was dependent upon a lot of outmoded notions about the earth's age and shape. It seemed to deny, in other words, that there is any distinction between spiritual and physical truth. If that were the case, each new scientific discovery might overturn our conceptions of ourselves and of God and of death, and man's spiritual life would have to be lived in perpetual fear of the laboratory.

At any rate, the defenders of the faith made their choice, and they have suffered from it. They did not choose to take a high stand upon such aspects of Christianity as are not concerned with whales or monkeys or other physical phenomena; they preferred to descend into the realm of fact, there to squabble with the men of science. And the exasperated men of science made them look foolish. Then, when it was too late to do so with dignity or effect, they tried to retreat onto their own proper ground. But by that time their prestige was seriously impaired, and the widespread decline in religious faith—which is one of the most striking characteristics of the world around us—was well under way.

2

Matthew Arnold's life (1822-1888) exactly coincides with the period of greatest activity of the various forces I have been discussing. He grew to manhood, via the conventional Rugby and Oxford, in the eighteen-forties, the terrible "hungry forties," when the damage that the industrial revolution

inflicted on England's manhood was at its height, unalleviated as yet by the humane legislation that came in the train of democracy. So Arnold was aware of the worst possible consequences of the new industrialism. Then, in 1851, Arnold took up the arduous work by which he earned his living for the next thirty-five years, the inspectorship of schools. This meant that he travelled about, investigating the conduct of the schools under government supervision, and reporting on them. Even during the ten years that he held the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford—a not very exacting position—Arnold continued his school inspecting, and hence throughout his adult life he remained in close touch with the groups that were helping to form the ideas of the newly educated lower middle class and workingmen. Twice he was sent abroad, to make reports on the state schools of France and Italy and Germany, so that he was able to observe this aspect of the industrial revolution on the Continent as well as in England.

Somehow there has come into circulation the notion that Arnold was a withdrawn and scholarly person whose approach to life was largely literary and who always had about him the flavour of the academic. This is untrue. Arnold was a scholar and a man of breeding, and he bore himself with the reserve that might be expected from such a person. But he was not handicapped either by coldness in the face of human fellowship or by withdrawal from the matter-of-fact and every-day aspects of life. Through a large part of every year Arnold was travelling about his district, sleeping sometimes at country inns, frequently at the house of a local business man or Nonconformist minister, and in this way learning something about the real England which underlay the pleasing surface of his school and college days. It was financial need which made Arnold continue in this work until two years before his death, but he was well repaid by a knowledge and understanding of his times more extensive and more profound than that of any other Victorian poet.

We have seen that the Victorian spirit in politics meant a compromise between the old aristocracy and the new forces which the industrial revolution was producing. In literature and in thought the Victorians attempted a similar compromise. The world was being transformed; strange and perturbing forces were liberated; the old order in religion seemed to be passing, like the old order in politics and in the physical details of life. Yet the Victorians believed that the essential merit of the former system might be preserved, and united with whatever of value emerged from the new. If organised religion was losing force, still, they thought, its austerity and spiritual zeal might be preserved without its supernatural sanction. If "American democracy" must triumph over oligarchy, still the urbane and useful traditions of the oligarch might be maintained, and there was no necessity of surrendering to the vulgarity which, to their minds, America represented. Such was the process, usually not conscious, which underlay Victorian thought. Because it was not conscious, it sometimes resulted in a pathetic self-satisfaction, as in Tennyson. Tennyson was aware of conflict between an old order and a new; but because he did not examine the conditions of this conflict with any care, he never realised that he and his contemporaries were engaged in a losing struggle to preserve the best of what was passing while rejecting the worst of what was growing up; but rather he felt confident that the changes which were coming over life must be changes for the better. The Victorian Age, he felt certain, was a good thing; and since change had produced the Victorian Age, might there always be much change!

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change.

In Arnold there was no such complacency, because in Arnold there was a troubled knowledge of the far-reaching and destructive changes which were about to take place. He was

aware of the probability of just such spiritual and intellectual anarchy as has, in fact, overtaken the world. He saw that the old aristocracy was bankrupt, morally and intellectually, and that it must go. He realised how very different the new world would be, once his lower middle class acquaintances had taken charge. He had even been to the United States, and knew something at first hand about the nation which was further than any other along the road of democracy—a road which, in view of the industrial revolution, all nations must travel. Alongside of this accurate and painstaking awareness of the new forces, Arnold had an extensive culture. He not only knew, and had made his own, the literature and history of England and the classical world—that much might be expected of any man with his training—but he was widely read in the literature of Italy and Germany and France. In his semi-official travels, he had unusual opportunities for studying those countries, especially since he spoke German and French fluently.¹ Also, Arnold's cultural background was made still richer by his good fortune in being the son of the famous Dr. Arnold of Rugby. Dr. Arnold was a churchman, and a zealous church reformer, and his son grew up in an atmosphere of religious earnestness and religious controversy which prepared him for adult life in a world one of whose most insistent problems was whether or not anything could be saved from the wreck which had overtaken the Church.

So when Matthew Arnold wrote of the world about him, whether in prose or in poetry, he did not write from ignorant complacency, but from concern over the facts. He was conscious of the problem in adjustment which faced his generation, and it is the struggle to effect these adjustments which is the keynote of the Victorian Age—the struggle to infuse the

¹ I do not mean to imply that Arnold had mastered the spirit of all these literatures. The barriers of race frequently were insurmountable, especially as regards French poetry, to which he was strangely insensitive. Nevertheless, he was truly aware of these literatures, and had gained much from them—which is more than should be said of either Tennyson or Browning.

perplexing and recalcitrant material of an increasingly industrial, scientific, journalistic and democratic society with the spiritual and social and intellectual ideals of an earlier age. It was not until Victorianism had died, and the modern world came into being, that the ideals themselves were seriously questioned, or that any attempt was made to find a new code which might be more easily adjusted to the new environment. The great Victorians accepted almost unanimously the ideals of spiritual life, of conduct, of literary and scholarly work, which they absorbed in their youth; and they were aware—to a greater or a lesser extent, depending on their acuteness of vision—that society was developing along lines which threatened these ideals. They met the problem in various ways; but the problem was always the same: how to support and strengthen the old ideals so that they might maintain their power in a treacherous new world. Carlyle and Ruskin and Arnold and Tennyson and George Eliot and William Morris and Meredith—these writers differed largely as to their prescriptions for society, but they agreed fairly well as to the qualities which a good life should contain. In the Twentieth Century, on the other hand, no such unanimity will be found.

3

I have always insisted that the only right way to an outward transformation was through an inward one, and that the business for us and for our age was the latter.

In these words Matthew Arnold sums up the purport of his writing. There was no use trying to turn back time; there was no use trying to control or direct economic development by external, political action. Anything which took place in the realm of government would be a projection of the inner life of society; and the danger to the world, as he saw it, was that the modern distracting and disordering conditions imperilled such inner life. So a transformation must take place on that

level, if the new forces were to be subdued to the service of the spirit, instead of controlling and degrading it.

A prerequisite for any such transformation in England, according to Arnold, was clearness of feeling, light. The English public was fairly well supplied with good intentions, and conscience, and all the raw material of idealism; but these fine qualities were muddled, confused, and so rendered almost useless. Arnold was fond of comparing the English and the French, on this point. He believed that the latter were weaker than the English in moral qualities, but that they were far superior to the English in light. In one of his letters, Arnold compared himself to Renan, saying that the two of them were trying to accomplish about the same result, only Renan, being a Frenchman, tended to inculcate morality upon his nation, as what they most wanted, whereas Arnold himself tended to inculcate intelligence upon the English nation, as what they most wanted. I feel that the use of the word "intelligence" suggests a too purely intellectual quality and does not do justice to Arnold's idea. He expresses himself more exactly in the poem called "A Summer Night." In the early part of this poem, Arnold describes the two classes, into one or another of which almost all of mankind may be put. First are the people who wear away their lives at some monotonous task which has no meaning for them:

And as, year after year,
Fresh products of their barren labour fall
From their tir'd hands, and rest
Never yet comes more near,
Gloom settles slowly down over their breast.
And while they try to stem
The waves of mournful thought by which they are prest,
Death in their prison reaches them
Unfreed, having seen nothing, still unblest.

And then there is the smaller group of people who "escape their prison and depart on the wide Ocean of Life." These

are the romantics, high-heartedly following some unexamined impulse which usually, in the end, leads to disaster.

Awhile he holds some false way, undebarr'd
 By thwarting signs, and braves
 The freshening wind and blackening waves.
 And then the tempest strikes him, and between
 The lightning bursts is seen
 Only a driving wreck,
 And the pale Master on his spar-strewn deck . . .
 Still bent to make some port he knows not where,
 Still standing for some false impossible shore.

And then comes the central problem of Arnold's thought:

Is there no life but these alone?
 Madman or slave, must man be one?

And Arnold's answer:

Plainness and clearness without shadow of stain!
 Clearness divine!
 Ye Heavens, whose pure dark regions have no sign
 Of languor, though so calm, and though so great
 Are yet untroubled and unpassionate. . . .
You remain
 A world above man's head, to let him see
 How boundless might his soul's horizons be,
 How vast, yet of what clear transparency. . . .
 How fair a lot to fill
 Is left to each man still.

It is this "plainness and clearness without shadow of stain" of which, in Arnold's view, England was in need. The addition of such "light" to the moral and religious qualities which he felt sure England possessed would give cohesion and force to these qualities and so make possible the maintenance of a spiritual life in the new, troubled world. But it is obvious that this "clearness" which Arnold seeks is not mere intellectual clarity, such as Voltaire might have recommended. It

is that, but it is more too. It is "clearness divine," clearness which is mirrored in the sky, the contemplation of which enlarges the soul's horizon, suggesting "how fair a lot to fill is left to each man still." The Greeks had this quality of light in a higher degree than any other people, and it was in their literature that Arnold learned to value it. In his prose he frequently urged a study of the Greeks as a corrective for the English people. He did not feel that the Greeks were in all ways superior, but merely that they were superior in this one attribute which England so sadly lacked.

It was his faith in "clearness divine," as well as in the health-giving power of human companionship and human example, which gave Arnold confidence for the future of the race, in spite of his melancholy awareness that the world around him was ailing and that every quality in life which he most valued was in danger of being submerged. In a poem called "The Future," Arnold pictures the disorder of modern life:

This tract which the River of Time
Now flows through with us, is the Plain.
Gone is the calm of its earlier shore.
Border'd by cities and hoarse
With a thousand cries is its stream.
And we on its breast, our minds
Are confused as the cries which we hear,
Changing and shot as the sights which we see.

It is natural, he goes on, to conclude that civilisation is in its decline:

And we say that repose has fled
Forever the course of the River of Time.
That cities will crowd to its edge
In a blacker incessanter line;
That the din will be more on its banks,
Denser the trade on its stream,
Flatter the plain where it flows,

Fiercer the sun overhead.
That never will those on its breast
See an ennobling sight,
Drink of the feeling of quiet again.

But—and this is the point of the poem—such pessimism, although plausible, is by no means necessary:

Haply, the River of Time,
As it grows, as the towns on its marge
Fling their wavering lights
On a wider statelier stream—
May acquire, if not the calm
Of its early mountainous shore,
Yet a solemn peace of its own.

And the width of the waters, the hush
Of the grey expanse where he floats,
Freshening its current and spotted with foam
As it draws to the Ocean, may strike
Peace to the soul of the man on its breast:

As the pale Waste widens around him—
As the banks fade dimmer away—
As the stars come out, and the night-wind
Brings up the stream
Murmurs and scents of the infinite Sea.

This is a subdued optimism, to be sure; but is not such optimism, from a man who has faced the full perplexity of modern life, more reassuring than the facile cheerfulness of Tennyson, whose eyes were averted from at least half of human ken, or even than the boisterous good humour of Browning, whose mind, content to exercise itself with Renaissance Italy, was untroubled by awareness of Manchester? Browning was an important poet, and he had many poetic attributes which Arnold lacked, but I think it a mistake to regard him as the more vital figure on the ground of his astonishing satisfaction with the world. I cannot help feeling that Browning's riotous optimism was due in part to the fact that a combination of wealth and an unspeculative mind

made it possible for him to ignore—more` completely than any of his great contemporaries—the perplexities and the sorrows of his generation. Arnold was hopeful in spite of sensitive awareness of those perplexities and sorrows, and in spite of partaking of many of them in his own experience. Therefore, to me, his hopefulness is a more impressive testimony to the value of life than is the jaunty gladness of Browning.¹ It is the subdued, suffering, but determinedly hopeful Arnold who gives me the sense of

How fair a lot to fill
Is left to each man still.

The type of reasoning by which I have tried to suggest my conclusions in regard to the optimism of Arnold and of Browning illustrates one relation between the study of poetry and the study of history. The absolute and unhistorical judgment comes first; that is, the critic must first feel intuitively—on the basis of his own inner experience—that such-and-such is the truth about some poem or some poet. Having felt this, it is proper for him to examine the story of the author's life and of his times, and if such investigation appears to explain and substantiate the original intuition, well and good; if not, the intuition should not be rejected necessarily, but it should be tested by fuller experience, and held in suspicion meanwhile. I am aware, of course, that this is a method of reasoning which is derisively called "rationalisation." However, I believe it to be the only excusable type of reasoning for the artist or the critic of art. Such an one *must* start with the intuition, with the direct awareness. If, then, he wishes to explain his immediate judgment, he must

¹ The whole point of this comparison between Browning and Arnold depends upon my conclusion that Browning obtains his gladness by ignoring life, rather than by accepting it. There is no reason why a person should not combine Arnold's sensitiveness and grasp of circumstances with Browning's ebullience. Mr. Chesterton has actually done this. If Browning had done it, he would—with his energy of spirit, his capacity for observation and expression, his great dramatic gifts—have been one of the foremost poets. Instead, he is merely one of the most effective poets.

cast about for reasons, and if the reasons are wisely chosen, and presented with imagination, they may well add richness and colour to the first judgment itself, suggesting new and fruitful ways of feeling about long known works of art. There is always, of course, the danger that the process may turn out to have been rationalisation in the unfavourable sense, namely, a presentation of specious excuses for an unexamined prejudice. This is a danger inherent in literary criticism, for such criticism is not a science. The critic's integrity and knowledge of himself are his chief guides; and when these fail him he will produce bad criticism.

I have dealt at length with the somewhat melancholy hopefulness of Arnold, and I wish now to dissect that state of mind and to ask what aspects of the life about him he found deplorable and where he discovered grounds for his hope.

Above all else, it was the complication and the hurry of modern life which discouraged Arnold. "Repose has fled," as he said in "The Future." By this he meant that it grew increasingly difficult, each decade, for a man to cultivate his soul undistracted by the charms, the obligations, or the excitements of the new, bustling, utterly unquiet life which the industrial revolution had ushered in. Already in 1800 Wordsworth was complaining of "the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies"; and by the middle of the century this state of affairs—which tends, as Wordsworth said, to reduce the mind "to a state of almost savage torpor"—was much aggravated. . . . If we, to-day, were translated into Matthew Arnold's England, we should probably feel ourselves in the midst of a desert of peacefulness and calm—so quickly has the industrial revolution fulfilled Arnold's worst fears and made man's life noisy and fast and turgid beyond description. But to him, the England of 1850 was already a hurried and uneasy

country. Comparing the life about him with that of the Seventeenth Century Scholar-Gipsy, Arnold writes:

—No, no, thou hast not felt the lapse of hours.
 For what wears out the life of mortal men?
 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls:
 'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again,
 Exhaust the energy of strongest souls,
 And numb the elastic powers.
 Till having used our nerves with bliss and teen,
 And tired upon a thousand schemes our wit,
 To the just-pausing Genius we remit
 Our worn-out life, and are—what we have been.
 Thou hast not liv'd, why shouldst thou perish, so?
 Thou hadst *one* aim, *one* business, *one* desire:
 Else wert thou long since number'd with the dead—
 Else hadst thou spent, like other men, thy fire.

It is the difficulty, in the new and vastly distracting England which surrounded Arnold, of having "*one* aim, *one* business, *one* desire,"—it is this difficulty which accounted, to his mind, for the illness of the modern world. "O Life unlike to ours!" he says to the Scholar-Gipsy:

Thou waitest for the spark from Heaven: and we,
 Vague half-believers of our casual creeds,
 Who never deeply felt nor clearly will'd,
 Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
 Whose weak resolves never have been fulfill'd;
 For whom each year we see
 Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
 Who hesitate and falter life away,
 And lose to-morrow the ground won to-day—
 Ah, do not we, Wanderer, await it too?

 But fly our paths, our feverish contact fly!
 For strong the infection of our mental strife,
 Which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest;
 And we should win thee from thy own fair life,
 Like us distracted, and like us unblest.
 Soon, soon thy cheer would die,

Thy hopes grow timorous and unfixed thy powers,
And thy clear aims be cross and shifting made:
And then thy glad perennial youth would fade,
Fade, and grow old at last, and die like ours.

I do not know anywhere a more succinct description of modern life than in these stanzas. The mental strife, "which, though it gives no bliss, yet spoils for rest;" the hopes grown timorous and the clear aims crossed and shifting; the half-felt "casual creeds"—all these calamities had overtaken England during Arnold's lifetime and that of his father, as the result, direct and indirect, of the forces discussed earlier in this chapter. Science and industrialism, between them, were producing a world in which mankind felt alien and disregarded. To-day we have grown accustomed to that state of affairs, and our wisdom consists in facing it with an unbecoming levity, in order that we may avoid the question what to do about it all. From Arnold's day to the present, this modern illness has developed steadily throughout the white man's world, and we are now engaged in conferring it upon Asia and Africa as well. We shall find it in the following chapters under many names and appearances, but we shall never find it more excellently characterised than here, in its youth, by Arnold.

Another aspect of modernity which Arnold fully shares, although he is inclined to deplore it, is the loss of faith in organised and dogmatic religion. The full pathos of that loss can only be known by men who have experienced the full beauty and protection of faith—and Arnold was one of these:

Ay, ages long endured his span
Of life, 'tis true receiv'd,
That gracious Child, that thorn-crowned Man!
He liv'd while we believ'd.

While we believ'd, on earth he went,
And open stood his grave.
Men call'd from chamber, church, and tent,
And Christ was by to save.

Now he is dead. Far hence he lies
 In the lorn Syrian town,
 And on his grave, with shining eyes,
 The Syrian stars look down.

In vain men still, with hoping new,
 Regard his death-place dumb,
 And say the stone is not yet to,
 And wait for words to come. . . .

Alone, self-pois'd, henceforward man
 Must labour, must resign
 His all too human creeds, and scan
 Simply the way divine.

The element of Stoicism in this last stanza is very characteristic of Arnold, who learns the same lesson of self-dependence from the stars and the ocean:

Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
 Undistracted by the sights they see,
 These demand not that the things without them
 Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

Arnold also shared the Stoic's feeling for Necessity:

Seeing this Vale, this Earth, whereon we dream,
 Is on all sides overshadow'd by the high
 Uno'erleap'd Mountains of Necessity,
 Sparing us narrower margin than we deem.

And the Stoic's determination to turn in upon himself:

What though the holy secret which moulds thee
 Moulds not the solid Earth? though never Winds
 Have whisper'd it to the complaining Sea,
 Nature's great law, and law of all men's minds?
 To its own impulse every creature stirs:
 Live by thy light, and Earth will live by hers.

However, Arnold did not completely adopt Stoicism—which involves the rejection of all pleasures and satisfactions which

do not come from within—because he was too vitally aware of the joys of companionship and a shared life. Also, he considered Stoicism to be defeat and frustration. He writes of the calm

of Stoic souls, who weigh
Life well, and find it wanting, nor deplore:
But in disdainful silence turn away,
Stand mute, self-center'd, stern, and dream no more.

This was not Arnold's way. The people whom he most admired, and sought to emulate, were those such as he describes in "Rugby Chapel," who, so far from turning away from life in disdainful silence, both take an active part themselves and also attempt to be an aid to others. Such people—presuming to be their brothers' keepers—would be abhorrent to the self-contained Stoic. . . . Yet it is important to realise how much Arnold was attracted to Stoicism; because, as we shall see, Stoicism is one of the signs of the modern world. In the poem "Resignation," Arnold says that he cannot censure any one who takes refuge in this philosophy:

Blame thou not therefore him who dares
Judge vain beforehand human cares.
Whose natural insight can discern
What through experience others learn.
Who needs not love and power, to know
Love transient, power an unreal show.

And a little later in the same poem, the essence of Stoicism is compressed into a couplet:

Yet they, believe me, who await
No gifts from Chance, have conquered Fate.

Here is as concise a summing up of the philosophy as Epicurus achieved in his famous sentence:

I have learned to know, whatever happens, that if it is not a matter of choice it is nothing to me.

Stoicism was the philosophy of the Roman Empire, and it is interesting to notice that it is becoming important as an element in the thought of our somewhat similar world to-day. Arnold, in one of his last poems, pointed out this analogy between the historical cycle which we are undergoing and that of the classical world at the time of the Roman Empire:

Well nigh two thousand years have brought
Their load, and gone away,
Since last on earth there lived and wrought
A world like ours to-day.

Like ours it look'd in outward air!
Its head was clear and true,
Sumptuous its clothing, rich its fare,
No pause its action knew; . . .

On that hard Pagan world disgust
And secret loathing fell.
Deep weariness and sated lust
Made human life a hell.

In his cool hall, with haggard eyes,
The Roman noble lay;
He drove abroad, in furious guise,
Along the Appian Way;

He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,
And crown'd his hair with flowers—
No easier nor no quicker pass'd
The impracticable hours.

This is the analogy which, as elaborated recently by Dr. Spengler, tends to introduce an ultimate and fatal pessimism into our thinking, by suggesting that the only course open to us now, in the alleged decline of the West, is to emulate the hard barbarian practicality of the Romans. I shall say more about Spengler's fatalism in the next chapter; here I wish only to point out that to Arnold this analogy suggested, not that we must remain material and sterile like the Romans, but that

we must strive to find a remedy similar to that which even they, ultimately, had thrust upon them:

The brooding East with awe beheld
Her impious younger world;
The Roman tempest swell'd and swell'd,
And on her head was hurl'd.

The East bowed low before the blast,
In patient, deep disdain.
She let the legions thunder past,
And plunged in thought again.

So well she mused, a morning broke
Across her spirit grey.
A conquering, new-born joy awoke,
And fill'd her life with day.

"Poor world," she cried, "so deep accurst!
That runn'st from pole to pole
To seek a draught to slake thy thirst—
Go, seek it in thy soul!"

And this advice which the East gave to the Roman Empire is the advice which Arnold gives to his generation: "I have always insisted that the only right way to an outward transformation was through an inward one, and that the business for us and for our age was the latter." In passing, it is interesting to contrast Arnold's picture of Europe, rich, active, successful, and accurst, with the easy satisfaction over this activity and success which underlay so much of Tennyson's work. Tennyson, like Arnold, distrusted the materialism of his age; but unlike Arnold, he never realised that all the bustling busy-ness which made him prefer fifty years of Europe to a cycle of Cathay was the inevitable counterpart of this materialism. It was just such superficial acceptance, such inability to look below the pleasing surface of Victorian prosperity, which prevented Tennyson from becoming a great poet. Wordsworth wrote:

All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.

Tennyson had the organic sensibility of a great poet; and he had the power to express beautifully anything which he was capable of feeling or thinking; but he could not think deeply—and this, of course, implies a spiritual shortcoming quite as much as an intellectual. A man may think acutely, and cleverly, with his mind alone; but to think deeply requires a larger endowment.

Arnold, while admiring Tennyson's "temperament and artistic skill," wrote:

I do not think Tennyson is a great and powerful spirit in any line—as Goethe was in the line of modern thought, Wordsworth in that of contemplation, Byron even in that of passion; and unless a poet, especially a poet at this time of day, is that, my interest in him is only slight, and my conviction that he will not finally stand high is firm.

It seems probable to me that this will be the judgment of the future upon Tennyson.

To return to the question of Arnold and Stoicism: I have pointed out that while Arnold did not accept Stoicism, still, while waiting for the spiritual regeneration which he felt must come to Europe, he was driven by the weariness and perplexity of modern life—just as Hardy and Housman and many others have since been driven—towards this philosophy with which the Romans faced their similar weariness. Yet Arnold would not accept the Stoic position, for that would have meant abandoning his ideals of human companionship and of mutual assistance. The man who awaits "no gifts from Chance" is the man whose desires and interests extend to nothing outside himself. He stands "mute, self-centred, stern." Arnold, on the other hand, was deeply aware of, and dependent upon,

The thousand sweet still joys of such
As hand in hand face earthly life.

In "Dover Beach," after picturing the religious uncertainty of his age, the loss of faith, and the melancholy which afflicts life, he continues:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Here we are very close to the centre of Arnold's feeling: a melancholy which might well lead him to Stoic retreat, but which does not because he turns instead to the consolations of companionship, or which might well lead him to pessimism, but which does not because he has hope for the future and confidence that even in his own day a man's life may be a fair and splendid thing. I have shown how this confidence is expressed in "A Summer Night." In "Rugby Chapel," Arnold illustrates "how fair a lot to fill is left to each man still" by treating the career of his own father. He begins by asking:

What is the course of the life
Of mortal men on the earth?

Most men, he says, eddy about and blindly try one thing after another, achieving nothing. However,

there are some, whom a thirst
Ardent, unquenchable, fires,
Not with the crowd to be spent,
Not without aim to go round
In an eddy of purposeless dust,
Effort unmeaning and vain.

But in this group there are very few who can do more—who can even attempt more—than to attain, by themselves, to their goal. That is as much as the ordinary man need hope to accomplish; but it is not, by any means, the best that can be made of human life:

But thou wouldst not *alone*
Be saved my father! *alone*
Conquer and come to thy goal,
Leaving the rest in the wild.
We were weary, and we
Fearful, and we, in our march,
Fain to drop down and die.
Still thou turnedst, and still
Beckonedst the trembler, and still
Gavest the weary thy hand!
If, in the paths of the world,
Stones might have wounded thy feet,
Toil or dejection have tried
Thy spirit, of that we saw
Nothing! to us thou wert still
Cheerful, and helpful, and firm.
Therefore, to thee it was given
Many to save with thyself;
And, at the end of thy day,
O faithful shepherd, to come,
Bringing thy sheep in thy hand.

And through thee I believe
In the noble and great who are gone.

It is here, in this last sentence, that the value of such a life as Dr. Arnold's is summed up. A man who so lives that he can give to others faith in life itself, has accomplished the utmost. Arnold closes his poem with a description of the part played by such men in the past, and which will be played by them again in the future:

Then, in such hour of need
Of your fainting, dispirited race,

Ye, like angels, appear,
Radiant with ardour divine.
Beacons of hope, ye appear!
Languor is not in your heart,
Weakness is not in your word,
Weariness not on your brow.
Ye alight in our van; at your voice,
Panic, despair, flee away.
Ye move through the ranks, recall
The strugglers, refresh the outworn,
Praise, re-inspire, the brave.
Order, courage, return.
Eyes rekindling, and prayers,
Follow your steps as ye go.
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,
Strengthen the wavering line,
Stablish, continue our march,
On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the city of God.

There remains no ground for pessimism, if such realisation is within human attainment.

4

When Arnold was at work on one of his essays, he wrote to his mother :

I would far rather have it said how delightful and interesting a man was Joubert than how brilliant my article is. . . . One can only get oneself really accepted by men by making oneself forgotten in the people and doctrines one recommends. . . . I have felt how necessary it was to keep down many and many sharp and telling things that rise to one's lips, and which one would gladly utter if one's object was to show one's own abilities.

In these sentences lies the explanation of Arnold's style, both in prose and verse. The subject matter is what counts, and this subject matter must not be interfered with by the author's eccentricity or cleverness. In prose, Arnold's ideal means that "many sharp and telling things" will remain unsaid—an in-

teresting reversal of contemporary practice, wherein the subject of an essay is often a mere excuse for the sharp and telling things which the author tosses about. In verse, Arnold's ideal means that words will not be used for their sound chiefly—as sometimes in Milton and often in the romantic poets—that rhetoric will be avoided along with all distracting and elaborate metrical effects, and that everything possible will be done to create, out of language, a transparent medium of expression, so that the poem will come to the reader “with the gravity and force of experience, purged of all that is irrelevant and accidental.”¹ It is this ideal which Wordsworth was expressing when he wrote of “an incongruity which would shock the intelligent Reader, should the Poet interweave any foreign splendour of his own with that which the passion naturally suggests.” The poet, added Wordsworth, “will feel that there is no necessity to trick out or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which *his* fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.” Arnold probably acquired his ideal of style from the Greeks, and in his critical essays he is inclined to apply it as a general standard rather too dogmatically. The type of poetry which such an ideal produces, though a very great type, is by no means the only acceptable one. And it happens that in English poetry work such as Arnold's, and an ideal such as Arnold's, is distinctly rare. It is possibly a result of this ideal that he was unable to do justice to Shelley—whom he accuses of obscurity and meaninglessness—and that he unhesitatingly preferred the Greeks to Shakespeare. It is also probably a result of his success in embodying this ideal in his work, that Arnold's poetry has been so persistently undervalued. The English reading public is accustomed to poetry in which astonishing lines and verbal and metrical beauties force themselves upon

¹ The phrase is Sir Walter Raleigh's.

the attention. These are splendid qualities, but they are usually attained at a sacrifice of "plainness and clearness without shadow of stain." The French have had two traditions, that of flamboyance and that of "clearness divine." Victor Hugo is an example of the one quality; Racine of the other. It is significant that the greatness of Racine has scarcely ever been recognised by Englishmen, or at least by Englishmen who have expressed themselves in writing.¹

In attempting to sum up the quality of Arnold's verse, I can not do better than quote his own words in a letter to his mother, with the comment that the passage could not seem conceited to any one aware of the simplicity and candour with which Arnold expressed himself to his mother:

My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might fairly be urged that I have less poetical sentiment than Tennyson, and less intellectual vigour and abundance than Browning; yet, because I have perhaps more of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn, as they have had theirs.

¹ Mr. Lytton Strachey is an honourable exception.

Chapter Seven

THE CYCLE

Before considering the poetry of to-day, it will be useful to sum up the story of West-European civilisation as we have traced it in these essays on English poetry and life. Although there are many differences between England's development and that of her neighbours, still it is fair to consider that in main outlines her spiritual history is a cross section of the spiritual history of Western man.¹

When the Roman Empire had exhausted its long energy, and abandoned the attempt to control Europe, the emptiness which its withdrawal created was filled for the most part by Germanic barbarians who pushed in from the East. For five hundred years the story of Europe is the story of the attempts made by these people either to develop their own way of life or to remould themselves after the Southern fashion. In the Icelandic Edda-poetry we have seen one of these efforts illustrated, and in the English poet Cynewulf we have seen the other. By the year 1000 it had become clear that Christian civilisation was to prevail in Europe. This meant that the spirit of the *Voluspo* was somehow to be incorporated into the intricate spirit of Western Christianity, which was already a compound of Asiatic subtlety and Greek lucidity and the administrative genius of Rome. It seems probable that without this Germanic admixture Christianity might have grown into a very different thing; at least, there was the danger that the Mediterranean spirit would transform it into something placid and perfect, like a Greek statue, something well organised

¹ The generalisations which follow doubtless partake of the inaccuracy and unsatisfactoriness of all generalisations. They are offered chiefly for the thought-provoking qualities which may be in them.

and smoothly run, like a Roman diocese, but something which, with the passage of centuries, would have lost its Syrian fervour. For in the clear, bright atmosphere of that Classical world, life tended to seem finite and comprehensible—hence the “plainness and clearness without shadow of stain” which characterises Greek thought. The greatness of the Middle Ages is in large part due to the fact that during the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries all the capacities of the diverse races of Europe were co-operating in the service of a single ideal. The Gothic cathedral is the monument to this ideal; and although the comparison between Chartres and the Parthenon is old and trite, it is too illuminating for me to pass it by. . . . On the one hand is a building suggestive of infinity and faith, a dark aspiring building, filled with mystery and the feeling of awe—a suitable shrine for an image of the triumphant victim on the cross. Contrasted with this is a building of finite and comprehensible beauty, a beauty so extreme that it stabs the heart with wonder, but so serene and clear, so bright and so earth-founded, that it avoids as far as possible the suggestion of infinity or other-worldliness. Within the building was a statue of Athene, a calm figure, suggestive of wisdom, dignity, restraint—human qualities which had been raised to their highest powers and disassociated from human imperfection, but which remained human qualities nevertheless. This goddess could exalt men, and lead them to greatness, but she could not stir in them the nameless nostalgia for an eternal home, or the humility before life’s inscrutable pain, which are evoked by the crucified God. . . . The Gothic cathedral could not have attained its full development by the shores of the Mediterranean; and northern Europe could not have organised the Catholic Church, or regulated its doctrines, or created its philosophy. It was the fusion of northern, forest-bred feeling for infinity beyond space and time with the southern, classical tradition of ordered thought and limited, explicable aspirations—it was this fusion, undertaken in the

service of a religion from western Asia, a religion profound and subtle enough to give scope for all the spiritual growth of which mankind was capable, that explains the greatness of the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries. For the church which resulted therefrom was able to combine mysticism and rationalism, poetry and law, offering a fulfilment of man's aspiration and at the same time controlling his most misleading weaknesses. St. Francis was encouraged; yet mysticism did not develop its disruptive tendencies. St. Thomas Aquinas was encouraged; yet reason did not deny the evidences of the soul. The heirs of Aristotle and the heirs of Tribonian guarded the intellectual and temporal inheritance of the Church, while the presence within the fold of the heirs of the Poetic Edda helped to preserve that inheritance from becoming too classicised, too space-bound and earthly.

In poetry, Dante shows the union of these diverse forces; and incidentally he supplies a clear illustration of the contrast between Western man's aspiration toward infinity, and Classical man's taste for the limited and world-enclosed ideal. For Dante encounters Ulysses in the underworld, and the difference between his Ulysses and Homer's explains my statement that the Mediterranean peoples, uninfluenced from the North, could never have produced a Gothic cathedral. . . . Homer's Ulysses sought to regain Ithaca, and there take up once more his life as an heroic chieftain. He was interfered with by fate, in the form of angry gods, and made to wander far, suffering romantic catastrophes. But always, after each surprising interlude, he returns to his matter-of-fact ambition:

*Ἦνθ' ἐν δὲ προτέρῳ πλέομεν ἀχαχήμενοι ἦτορ
ἄσμενοι ἔκ θανάτοιο, φίλους ολέσαντες ἑταίρους.¹*

This sentence is a refrain to Ulysses' account of his adventures; and the point I wish to emphasise is that each time he

¹ Thence we sailed onward stricken at heart, yet glad as men saved from death, albeit we had lost our dear companions.

"sailed onward," it was toward the finite and remembered country of Ithaca, where Ulysses would put his affairs in order and then settle down to grow old sedately. . . . But Dante could imagine no such end, and no such ambition, for a famous hero. Dante's Ulysses did not steer toward Ithaca, but gave himself to the immortal search for wisdom, sailing ever west so that he might have experience of the unpeopled land behind the sun and follow after virtue and knowledge. "When I departed from Circe," says this Thirteenth Century Ulysses, "neither fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor the due love that should have cheered Penelope, could conquer in me the ardour that I had to gain experience of the world, and of human vice and worth." So he sailed west with a single ship, and when he reached the Pillars of Hercules and wished to persuade his followers to put forth on the unknown, desperate Atlantic, he spoke those lines which to a Greek would have been wasted beauty, but which to a Western man are symbolic of all things unattainable and dear:

"O frati," dissì, "che per cento milia
perigli siete giunti all' occidente,
a questa tanto picciola vigilia

de' vostri sensi, ch' e del rimanente,
non vogliate negar l'esperienza,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.

Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza."¹

"Ye were not formed to live like brutes." In this case, living like brutes meant behaving sensibly and practically, as the Greek Ulysses always strove to behave, whenever fate al-

¹ "O brothers!" I said, "who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West, deny not, to this the brief vigil of your senses that remains, experience of the unpeopled world behind the Sun. Consider your origin: ye were not formed to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge."

lowed him opportunity. But the Western Ulysses would have none of this, and he led his men out across the ocean and down beyond the equator, until they came within sight of a great mountain, somewhere on the limit of the world. There the ship was assailed by a tempest, and sank with all aboard her.¹

English poetry gives no picture of the Middle Ages at the time of Dante and of their greatness, for in the Twelfth and Thirteenth centuries England was still divided into a Saxon-Celtish people and a Norman-French ruling class. By the time she had drawn herself together and once more found her voice, the medieval synthesis had broken down and the Church was growing daily more venal and discreditable. Hence it is only the faltering prelude to the Middle Ages, in the days before King Alfred, and the ignoble ending of them, from the time of Chaucer to the time of Henry VIII, that the English-speaking reader finds mirrored in his own poetry.

The decline of this civilisation which I have been sketching came when the hold of the Christian ideal upon man's spirit diminished, and Europe grew temporarily irreligious. This weakening of religion made possible the disruption of Catholic unity; and once that process had begun, there was no longer a compelling incentive toward co-operation, and each section of the continent began to indulge its native tendencies. . . .

¹ It is interesting to find that Tennyson's Ulysses is brother to Dante's. He speaks of himself as

yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

And he remarks:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.

It is hard to imagine what ideas could be more foreign than these to the Greek warrior-chief whose noble endurance and hardihood and courage and perseverance were all employed in the simple task of finding his way home again, that he might free his house of enemies and live there undisturbed until the end.

In Italy there grew up humanism, a this-worldly revival of this-worldly classicism, beautiful and brief, an amusement for the prosperous class, hence rootless and unpopular. During the Middle Ages, the community had participated in a Gothic cathedral, and in the art which ornamented it. But few except the scholar or the dilettante could appreciate the work of Renaissance Florence, and this esoteric quality has clung to European art ever since. . . . Meanwhile, in the northern countries, spiritual life tended more and more to take the form of mysticism, which is the reverse of everything this-worldly or classical. And alongside of this mysticism, which could naturally appeal only to a small group in any community, the same growing prosperity and declining spirituality which had bred humanism in the South was producing the national state and the alliance between strong kings and a strong middle class. While Italy was exhausting her energies in the search for a beauty which was sterile because it was no longer the expression of a deeply realised truth, the Northerners—in France and England and some of the German states—were building upon the ruins of the Middle Ages an edifice which at least embodied practical and worldly values. These renovated states, whose existence was in part an accidental product of shifting trade routes and the discovery of new silver supplies, were safer and more orderly than their medieval predecessors; and the growing security of property encouraged the acquisitive instinct to such an extent that it could absorb a large part of the energies which had once been directed into spiritual channels.¹ When Northern spirituality did contrive to assert itself in a protest at the corruption of the old church, this was converted into a political movement by the business men and business princes, and before the end of the

¹ This sharp division into northern and southern Europe is more useful than accurate. The Italian Renaissance spread, of course, to most of the Continent, and nationalism may be found in Spain. Still it remains an honest and informing generalisation that humanism is a product of the Mediterranean world, and the new business man's nationalism a product of the North.

Sixteenth Century the revolt from Rome had dramatised, and made clear to all men, the death of the Middle Ages.

With the Seventeenth Century, the modern world began, and at the same time there came—in England at least—a resurrection of religious ardour.

A comparison between the Sixteenth and the Seventeenth Century Cromwells will illustrate what I mean, for these men show, respectively, the unloveliness of Tudor Protestantism and the comparative nobility of the Puritan reform. Thomas Cromwell was the successor of Wolsey as the advisor and administrator of Henry VIII, and it was during his period of power that the Reformation was established in England. It was Cromwell who contrived the execution of Fisher and More, and it was Cromwell who suppressed the monasteries and with the loot therefrom bought what support was needed for the strong central government which he and Henry were creating. This plundering of the monasteries, under the cover of a moral reform, but really for the sake of securing a political change, seems to me a perfect symbol of Sixteenth Century Protestantism. If such behaviour, masquerading as religion, be compared with the work and motives of Oliver Cromwell, or Fairfax, or Milton, or Colonel Hutchinson, it will be seen why I regard the Sixteenth Century as marking the decay of medieval civilisation, and the Seventeenth Century as containing a genuine effort toward a rebirth of spiritual life.

However, just when Protestantism was demonstrating that it, too, could reach the heights, just when it was producing men who could be compared with the great figures of the Middle Ages, there came modern science, bringing with it problems which have harassed and disorganised Protestantism from the age of Pope to the age of Hardy. For science bred the rationalism of the Eighteenth Century, and that in its turn bred "natural religion" and—by reaction—Methodism. During the Middle Ages the spirit which produces a Hume and the spirit which produces a Wesley had co-operated in the

Catholic synthesis; in the Seventeenth Century they had co-operated again in such a figure as Milton, the individualist and Protestant; but in the Eighteenth Century they were each pursuing their own profitless paths. And they had scarcely been reunited, in the early Nineteenth Century, when fresh triumphs of science, plus the amazing and still unexplored industrial revolution, produced a situation too complicated to be immediately understandable, and too unstable for anything in the nature of purposeful control. In about a hundred and fifty years, Western man has tried to assimilate a new capitalism and new problems of industrial labour, a complete change in the effective size of his world due to new methods of transportation and communication, a steady increase of his power to control nature, a very rapid spreading of elementary education, and in the train of this the rise of political democracy and the development of a vicious system of demagoguery and propaganda.

It is no wonder that in the midst of such shifting chaos modern man has not contrived to find himself and to create a civilisation which has beauty, or even the promise of stability and health; and I can not see why a recognition of his failure to do these things need lead to pessimism. A little peace is all he needs, a little rest from progress. If the outer world should gain some stability, ceasing to be an unending pyrotechnic distraction, man would turn his attention inward with a great relief, and there is no reason to say that he could not make for himself a fair life in the Twentieth Century—a fairer life than he has known in western Europe at any time since the beginning of the modern era. I believe that he will be given this opportunity, for there are signs that progress will soon be relenting. It appears that we shall have to endure, and to assimilate, the conquest of the air; but after that we may be spared new miracles, at least until we have come to terms with the old. This is a rash prediction, and will perhaps be scorned by the man of science, and yet I make it out

of a deep certainty. My certainty is based in part on external reasons, which I shall give below, and in part upon an inner conviction that such must prove the case, because unless man finds a rest from marvels and a time to foster his soul he will not long continue to prosper in his uncontrollably complicated world. It is already clear—and has frequently been pointed out—that the machine is beginning to run the master. Although we still pretend to judge our mechanical creations in terms of human value, we often find ourselves powerless to dispense with these creations, or even to direct them, after we have judged them evil. Examples of this are the cheap newspapers, and a large part of modern advertising. Both of these plagues are the result of mechanical ingenuity which has made the printing and the distribution of the written word inexpensive. This achievement might have been a blessing for the human race, and may some time in the future become a blessing. Meanwhile it is a curse, because the temptation to become rich by using this new power in the exploitation of man's passions and of his coarse curiosity has proved irresistible. As a result, men who are not naturally monsters are doing their best to debauch whole nations, because the machine makes monthly demands for new extremes of sensationalism, new depths of vulgarity and meanness, if it is to continue growing. . . . What is needed is a little quiet, then the application of some sane values, and these huge and nasty stables will be cleaned out. As yet there has been no time for this sanity, because before the terms of a problem are clear in any one's mind, the problem has already doubled in complication. But such a time is coming, and I believe that the spirit which has sufficed man for so long will not now permit him to perish among a conglomeration of contraptions.

Whether man will gain this period for refreshment as a result of taking thought and consciously refraining from further elaborations of his life, or whether he will come by it as a result of an unplanned slowing-up of scientific advance,

makes little difference. The former would perhaps be the more satisfying method; the latter seems to me the more probable, for I believe that science will soon be forced to grant us a respite. My reason for this hope can be briefly stated in the words of Dr. Spengler:

Up to the end of the nineteenth century every step [in physical science] was in the direction of an inward fulfilment, an increasing purity, rigour and fullness of the dynamic Nature-picture—and then, that which had brought it to an optimum of theoretical clarity, suddenly becomes a *solvent*. This is not happening intentionally—the high intelligences of modern physics are, in fact, unconscious that it is happening at all—but from an inherent historical necessity. . . . This is the origin of the sudden and annihilating doubt that has arisen about things that even yesterday were the unchallenged foundation of physical theory. . . . This doubt is no longer the fruitful doubt of the Baroque, which brought the knower and the object of his knowledge together; it is a doubt affecting the very possibility of Nature-Science. . . . The theory of gravitation, which since Newton has been an unpregnable truth, has now been recognized as a temporally limited and shaky hypothesis. The principle of the Conservation of Energy has no meaning if energy is supposed to be infinite in an infinite space. . . . The luminiferous æther, again, was an ideal postulate of modern dynamics . . . but every conceivable hypothesis concerning the constitution of this æther has broken down under inner contradictions; more, Lord Kelvin has proved mathematically that there *can* be no structure of this light-transmitter that is not open to objections. . . . But, if these are serious enough doubts, the ruthlessly cynical hypothesis of the Relativity theory strikes to the very heart of dynamics. . . . “Correct” and “incorrect” are not the criteria by which such assumptions are to be tested; the question is whether, in the chaos of involved and artificial ideas that has been produced by the innumerable hypotheses of Radioactivity and Thermodynamics, it can hold its own as a usable hypothesis or not.

With the exception of the meaningless phrase, “inherent historical necessity,” this seems a true statement of the crisis in modern science. What it all amounts to is that science is abandoning the search for final “truth,” and has become content to devise hypotheses which are self-consistent and

“usable,” that is, which lead to results that are interesting, or suggestive, or have at least some temporary value. Now in so far as science comes to know that it is dealing with “involved and artificial ideas” which can only be justified by reference to their self-consistency, their inner harmony—their beauty, one might say—just so far will it cease to be practical and to have anything to say to the machinist or the inventor of the Edison type. It is in this latter field of applied science that the revolutions have become so disorganising to man’s spirit, and it is applied science which I believe will soon find itself deprived of revolutions because pure science will cease supplying it with new, and mechanically practical, ideas. Technical adroitness and efficiency may go on increasing steadily, and in fields like medicine—which is on the borderland between science and art—progress may be uninterrupted; but for the rest, we shall have some quiet. And it seems obvious to me that this quiet will be one of the greatest blessings ever conferred upon man. I do not wish to deny the possible value of modern improvements; I would merely assert that this value has not yet shown itself in terms of spiritual well-being, because man has not had opportunity to assimilate, or even to comprehend, his changed conditions. When some of us to-day look back upon the Middle Ages as upon a land of lost content, because of the spiritual peace which seems then to have been attainable, we should remember that in those days, in spite of physical dangers and the insecurity of property, the external conditions to which man had to adapt himself, and in accordance with which he had to find his soul’s welfare, remained relatively stable. So it is not surprising if medieval man was more familiar with the peace of God than we who are environed with the daily-changing chaos of the machine. As soon as this chaos stops proliferating, we can begin reducing it to order; but until that time we can do little except seek tranquillity in our own lives.

I would summarise the story of Western man, then, under

two main heads. First came a period of a thousand years, or a little less—bounded on one end by the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire and on the other end by the dissolution of the Western Christian Church. These centuries saw the slow rise, the fruition, and the decay of medieval culture. Then about the year 1600 began the second period, the period which was characterised at first by an abandonment of the attempt at international co-operation and a single Europe-wide synthesis, and by the coeval rise of Protestantism, individualism, and the national state. What would have come of all this, had it been allowed to develop naturally, we can only guess; because before the new spirit had fairly found itself, it was interrupted by the historical accidents of science and the industrial revolution. These two gods-from-the-machine interfered so radically with the course of events that European man has been struggling ever since to orient himself in the resulting welter. So far, his struggles have been unsuccessful, because the welter has grown more confusing with every decade. But a limit has been reached in that direction, and man must soon reorganise himself and rehabilitate his spiritual forces, or else descend into a self-destructive triviality in life and art. It is a contention of this book that by cultivating those activities which minister to the imagination, and behind that to the soul, it is possible to encourage such rehabilitation.

This view is opposed to much contemporary thought, which takes a masochistic pleasure in dwelling upon the fated decline of Western man. Dr. Spengler is an able representative of this view. He traces a very different cycle of development in Europe from that which I have suggested—a cycle beginning about the year 1000, reaching its height in the late Eighteenth Century, and commencing to decline immediately thereafter. He also points out that all previous cultures of which we have knowledge—such as the classical, the Egyptian, the Indian, etc.—have followed a similar course, rigidifying in each case after about eight hundred years into a sterile and

valueless form which may be snuffed out after another few centuries, as in the case of Rome, or which may linger on indefinitely, as in China. He then asserts, with plausible evidence, that we in the West have begun our period of ossification, and that nothing can interrupt this process. It follows that our only wisdom lies in directing our energies into such channels as may profitably be explored by an ossifying society. These channels lead, naturally, to material rather than to spiritual attainments; but Dr. Spengler would say that there is no use repining over that, since such is the only course which destiny permits to a people in our stage of civilisation. "Up to now," he writes, "every one has been at liberty to hope what he pleased about the future. . . . But henceforth it will be every man's business to inform himself of what *can* happen and therefore of what with the unalterable necessity of destiny and irrespective of personal ideals, hopes or desires, *will* happen. When we use the risky word 'freedom' we shall mean freedom to do, not this or that, but the necessary or nothing."

It seems to me that this conception of an inescapable destiny is uncalled for, and if it is uncalled for I feel certain that it should be eschewed. For it leads logically to a denial of any permanent values, and hence of any standards except those of utility or hedonism. In a world where at one period of a culture-development men are doomed to behave in a certain fashion, and at another period in another fashion, is not relativity the one enduring principle, and would not man be foolish to seek for lasting value behind the ever-shifting surfaces of life? Dr. Spengler's own answer to these questions is uncompromising: "It is *this* which is lacking to the Western thinker, the very thinker in whom we might have expected to find it—insight into the *historically relative* character of his data. . . . Here there is nothing constant, nothing universal." And again, "The real student of mankind treats no standpoint as absolutely right or absolutely wrong." These

somewhat gloomy views conform to one of the main tendencies of our age, so they have been taken more seriously than is necessary. Even if Dr. Spengler's assertions are all correct, they only prove that previous cultures have gone through the cycles which he describes, and by proving this they suggest that our own culture will develop—or that it has already developed—a tendency to ossify just as the earlier cultures have done. If this suggestion were looked upon as a warning, instead of as a pronouncement of unalterable doom, it might prove of great value to us, by directing our attention to a danger and arousing our self-conscious determination not to become entangled therein. So-called “economic law” provides an analogy which should teach us how to profit by Dr. Spengler's book. For instance, the Malthusian law in regard to the relation between population and food supply was first announced as a description of man's destiny. If so considered, it would condemn us all to hopelessness. But it has not been so considered; rather, it has been taken as a warning, and man has already accomplished much in the way of circumventing the tendency which Malthus described. If we were unconscious mechanisms, acted upon by forces over which we had no control, the Malthusian principle would probably hold, and so would other economic laws, and so, perhaps, would the Spenglerian doom. For whether Dr. Spengler's analysis of our culture-cycle is correct, or mine, or neither, it is certain that we are living in a society which surrounds us with unusually strong temptations to degrade our inner lives, distracting ourselves meanwhile with external activity. If we submit to such temptation, we shall become steadily more Alexandrian and more frivolous. But we are, after all, confronted only with a temptation, or perhaps with an economic tendency—not, at any rate, with a sentence. And in so far as we assert ourselves as self-conscious agents, rejecting the easy but unnecessary assumptions of fatalism,¹ and working to establish

¹ My reasons for calling these assumptions “unnecessary” are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

a relationship between our intentions and our conduct, in so far will we escape from all these "laws" and "destinies."

Apparently at an opposite extreme from Dr. Spengler's view of the future, with its fated decline and foregone ossification, is the view upheld by Mr. H. G. Wells, who is impressed by man's superiority to his alleged ancestors in the animal kingdom, and who feels that when a little more time has been allowed us and we have developed our higher faculties somewhat further, we should be able to construct a paradise on earth. This view is cheering, and is a corrective to the pessimism of many writers who survey the present scene. But it is obvious that its worth as an ideal will depend upon the nature of the "higher powers" which must be developed before man may come into his promised land. In his conception of those powers, Mr. Wells is disappointing. The future which he foresees is one in which man's reason will be free from the more obvious forms of superstition and in which his organising zeal will have surpassed itself. As a result of these changes, the world will run with a minimum of friction, and hence of effort. Machines will be omnipresent, and fantastically ingenious; working hours will be shorter and working days fewer; the population will be reduced until overcrowding is unknown anywhere; government will be as efficient as business. . . . From all this there emerges the picture of a life generous in time and room—yet the question suggests itself, Time and room for what? I do not deny that the world of Mr. Wells's dream would be preferable to the world which we see about us to-day; but I contend that it would be preferable for purely negative reasons, and hence that its merit would be accidental and more than usually fleeting. The physical evils and wretchedness which beset our society would have been removed, and the people who have been enduring those evils would naturally find themselves much benefited. But what would the inhabitants of that new, clean, efficient state *do* with their grateful leisure? Since

Mr. Wells has not suggested any far-reaching spiritual change which shall have come over them, we can answer this question by asking what most people do with their leisure to-day. The reply is too disagreeable and too obvious to bother recording.

The striking thing about Mr. Wells's picture of the future is that, stripped of its optimism, it is the identical picture which Dr. Spengler has suggested—a picture of mechanical efficiency, world organisation, and the direction of more and more energy outward in the service of the machine. Dr. Spengler paints this as our doom and our decline; Mr. Wells appears willing to embrace it as our privilege; but it is instructive to notice that both the thinker who deplores the mechanised future and the thinker who welcomes it agree in their estimate of the unimportant position which religion and art will occupy. Dr. Spengler denies that true religion or art can exist in a society as old as ours, while Mr. Wells appears to regard them as scarcely worthy of notice. If they exist at all in his world, it is as a function of material well-being; and this again is merely a roundabout way of agreeing with Dr. Spengler, for as soon as art or religion have become a function of material well-being they have become over-ripe and trivial—in other words, they have ceased to be.

Any attempt, then, to seek salvation merely by an intelligent and adroit use of the machine, merely by adjusting laws and overturning governments and organising production and making similar physical rearrangements—any such attempt will have no permanent value but will end in conducting us down the easy decline which Dr. Spengler has foretold. Even though higher pay and shorter hours and a more just division of profits and a still larger public capable of reading the newspapers should be the first fruits of this new age, still these benefits will be neither genuine nor lasting unless they are preceded by an inward transformation. All such material well-being, if it were a function of spiritual health, would be a

blessed thing; but considering it as an end in itself I can only see that it is better than material ill-being. This is saying a great deal; but it is saying it in negative terms. And there is no way of describing the Utopia of Mr. Wells, or of any other machine-venerator, save in negative terms. They all desire worlds from which this, that, or the other unpleasantness will have been eliminated, and they appear to imagine that in the then-vacant spaces positive values will spring up with the hardihood of weeds. In this they are mistaken. What will spring up will be one crop of misdirected passions to supplant another. For those are the weeds which cannot be kept down unless the land is diligently tended by a man determined to raise some crop of his own choosing. But no one will take this necessary trouble unless he puts high value upon the fruits of his labour. . . . This brings us back again to the beginning of the circle, for if a man's desire is material well-being, he will follow the Spenglerian doom, or embrace the Wellsian promise, and his world should become very scientific, and well-organised, and comfortable, and barren. But if a man's desire lies elsewhere, he will resent being told by Dr. Spengler that he must choose between these disagreeable ends or none at all, and he will try to cultivate, in his own life at least, all those things which Dr. Spengler has declared impossible. There is little use in arguing whether "society," in the Twentieth Century, can be poetic or religious, since nobody knows what the abstraction called "society" really means. But that poetry and religion are still available for the individual, any one can prove who cares to try.

PART THREE

Poetry and the World To-day

Chapter One

WINDS OF NIHILISM

I

Swinburne was born in 1837, only fifteen years later than Matthew Arnold. Yet Swinburne represents a new and un-Victorian attitude toward the changes which were coming over life. Arnold thought of democracy as a vulgarisation and a cheapening, and although he foresaw that it was inevitable, he was anxious to control and chasten it. Swinburne felt democracy and republicanism with the religious, exalted spirit of 1848—another example of a poet's reproducing in maturity the world which environed him during his formative years. So he celebrated the change from the old order, denouncing every institution which seemed to hinder it. Arnold had known religion—both in his father's house, and later at Oxford—as a precious and most needful ally, so he deplored its decline, striving always to preserve the spirit of religion, whatever catastrophe might overtake the form. Swinburne came to maturity when, in England, religion was in the midst of its undignified and useless contest with the men of science, and when, on the Continent, religion was the ally of anti-republican reaction—in Italy, where the Pope was an enemy of Italian unity, in Austria, and in the France of Napoleon III. So Swinburne conceived of religion as almost the supreme evil, as an engine of destruction and a painful fetter upon the spirit of man:

A creed is a rod,
And a crown is of night;
But this thing is God,
To be man with thy might,
To grow straight in the strength of thy spirit, and live out
thy life as the light.

This attitude toward a creed and a crown is most natural for the devotee of liberty who believes also in the perfectibility of man. If man, unhampered and unhelped, can grow straight and fair, fulfilling his own nature and helping to fulfil the purpose of life, then we have but to abolish restrictions such as those provided by most governments and by all churches, and a new day will dawn. In our generation, this faith seems silly and unpardonably optimistic; but it is worth noting that it is an inspiring and uplifting faith, and that it may even, if held devoutly enough, become a religion. The Spirit of the world declares its purpose to Swinburne as follows:

Though sore be my burden
And more than ye know,
And my growth have no guerdon
But only to grow,
Yet I fail not of growing for lightnings above me
or deathworms below.

And it then tells what is expected of man:

I bid you but be;
I have need not of prayer;
I have need of you free
As your mouths of mine air;
That my heart may be greater within me, beholding
the fruits of me fair.

At first sight, this seems little more than the familiar Tennysonian satisfaction with change, or growth, or progress—unquestioned and for its own sake—plus the modern doctrine of “express yourself.” And looked at from a purely intellectual point of view, that is all it is. But felt, or experienced, as Swinburne experienced it, this doctrine becomes a new and nobler thing. These rather crude ideas of a world in which growth is itself an end and a source of value, become for Swinburne a key to the divine and a revelation of perfection and the means to his acceptance of, and identification with,

life. Because the conception of life upon which Swinburne's faith rests is inadequate and fragmentary, his poetry can never attain the quality of prophecy, yet as poetry of vision it can be deeply moving. The teaching need not be accepted in order to share the spirit with which it is presented. "I bid you but be" means, to Swinburne, that man has the high privilege of attaining freedom in order to further the purpose of the universe. For instance, he tells us how he is plagued with the question which Arnold and most of the Victorians were facing:

Then "Where is God? and whence is aid?
Or what good end of these?" she said;
"Is there no God or end at all
Nor reason with unreason weighed,
Nor force to disenthral
Weak feet that fall?

"No light to lighten and no rod
To chasten men? Is there no God?"
So girt with anguish, iron-zoned,
Went my soul weeping as she trod
Between the men enthroned
And men that groaned.

O fool, that for brute cries of wrong
Heard not the grey glad mother's song
Ring response from the hills and waves,
But heard harsh noises all day long
Of spirits that were slaves
And dwelt in graves.

And the answer that the "glad mother" gives is the answer we have already seen:

"There is no God, O son,
If thou be none."

But the significant thing is the mood which this answer engenders in Swinburne. It might have filled him with a sense

of the aimlessness of life, as a somewhat similar answer, taken ironically, filled Hardy. Instead:

So my soul sick with watching heard
That day the wonder of that word,
And as one springs out of a dream
Sprang, and the stagnant wells were stirred. . . .

For all things come by fate to flower
At their unconquerable hour,
And time brings truth, and truth makes free,
And freedom fills time's veins with power,
As, brooding on that sea,
My thought filled me. . . .

And with divine triumphant awe
My spirit moved within me saw,
With burning passion of stretched eyes,
Clear as the light's own firstborn law,
In windless wastes of skies
Time's deep dawn rise.

It is this "divine triumphant awe," aroused in Swinburne by the contemplation of man liberated and perfecting himself, which gives to his rather outmoded republicanism the quality of religion. The love of liberty, the hatred of oppression or restraint, the yearning to do something which might forward what he conceived to be the life-process and what he venerated as good—these emotions are felt by Swinburne with such intensity and nobility that the reader's act of sharing them becomes a purification. The liberty of which Swinburne writes is conceived, Miltonically, as the condition of spiritual life:

—Hath she on earth no place of habitation?
—Age to age calling, nation answering nation,
Cries out, Where is she? and there is none to say;
For if she be not in the spirit of men,
For if in the inward soul she hath no place,
In vain they cry unto her, seeking her face,
In vain their mouths make much of her; for they
Cry with vain tongues, till the heart lives again.

Although Swinburne has not understood the consequences and implications of this liberty, as Milton understood them, still he pays high tribute to liberty through all his better work, apprehending it in Greece, in the Italy of his day, in the future, in defeat and in victory, in the symbols of sea and wind and fire and light. He even tries to hypostatise this most nebulous of spirits, in order that he may bow before it and submit, for Swinburne knows the longing to accept the will of God:

There is no grief
Great as the joy to be made one in will
With him who is the lord and rule of life.

He dedicates himself to the service of liberty in language such as a lover would use:

Ask nothing more of me, sweet;
All I can give you I give.
Heart of my heart, were it more,
More would be laid at your feet:
Love that should help you to live,
Song that would spur you to soar.

He writes of those who have dedicated themselves to the service of liberty in the mood of the Hebrew prophets. Calling such servants The Pilgrims, he asks them,

O ye that follow, and have ye no repentance?
For on your brows is written a mortal sentence,
An hieroglyph of sorrow, a fiery sign,
That in your lives ye shall not pause or rest,
Nor have the sure sweet common love, nor keep
Friends and safe days, nor joy of life nor sleep.

And the pilgrims answer,

—These have we not, who have one thing, the divine
Face and clear eyes of faith and fruitful breast.

This is the mood of any man who is devoutly dedicated in any service; and therein lies the value of Swinburne's

poetry. Few people to-day share his faith, and it is doubtful whether many will ever again share it; but so long as man retains the capacity for high-hearted and ungrudging immolation, these poems will stir and kindle one of his noblest qualities. Before the sunrise of the new order which Swinburne anticipated with utter faith, he wrote of himself, as the poet of liberty:

I have love at least, and have not fear, and part not
From thine unnavigable and wingless way;
Thou tarriest, and I have not said thou art not,
Nor all thy night long have denied thy day.

Is not that a pure expression of the attitude which any man would wish to adopt, if he had been so fortunate or so courageous as to find something in the world which he considered venerable? It is interesting to notice how old-fashioned Swinburne's *Songs Before Sunrise* seem to-day, because of his whole-heartedness and enthusiasm. The sweeping, soul-easing completeness of his affirmations is little known in the modern world.

Thou tarriest, and I have not said thou art not,
Nor all thy night long have denied thy day.

How many of us can apply those words to our own relation with our own ideal? How many of us would have dared to write them, unhampered by qualifications, or scepticism, or a sense of the ridiculousness of such confidence?

By the spirit are things overcome; they are stark, and
the spirit hath breath;
It hath speech, and their forces are dumb; it is living,
and things are of death.
But they know not the spirit for master, they feel
not force from above,
While man makes love to disaster, and woos
desolation with love.

Swinburne was the last great poet of affirmation, and although we may lament that his not very profound mind seized upon the rather jejune faiths of 1848, we should be thankful that he found a faith of some sort; for his genius lay in enthusiasm and devotion, and he would have been wasted had he spent his life—like his contemporary, Thomas Hardy—in asserting over and over again how ironical and how meaningless the world had turned out to be.

Enough of Swinburne's time was spent in declaring the shortcomings of life, as it was; for he had another favourite subject, in addition to liberty: love. And for Swinburne love was usually the tormenting and terrible passion which destroys, rarely the healing and reconciling spirit which Arnold knew. Love is a scourge and a despair to Swinburne, leading him to cry, "What can be done with all these tears of ours?" The most that he could hope, apparently, was that by whole-souled devotion a man might turn his love into something generous, and so blind himself to the calamity that had come upon him. This is what Tannhäuser did:

And I forgot fears and all weary things,
All ended prayers and perished thanksgivings,
Feeling her face with all her eager hair
Cleave to me, clinging as a fire that clings

To the body and to the raiment, burning them;
As after death I know that such-like flame
Shall cleave to me forever; yea, what care,
Albeit I burn then, having felt the same?

This, in effect, is what happened to Tristram. His life was ruined altogether; but his love maintained its intense pure violence, so that to the end he could still have said proudly, "What care, albeit I burn then, having felt the same?" It is no wonder that Swinburne wrote as follows of the birth of love:

The weft of the world was untorn,
That is woven of the day on the night,
The hair of the hours was not white
Nor the raiment of time over-worn,
When a wonder, a world's delight,
A perilous goddess was born. . . .
Was there not evil enough,
Mother, and anguish on earth
Born with a man at his birth,
Wastes underfoot, and above
Storm out of heaven, and dearth . . .
And tears that spring and increase
In the barren places of mirth,
That thou, having wings as a dove,
Being girt with desire for a girth,
That thou must come after these,
That thou must lay on him love?

If Swinburne is old-fashioned in his Mazzini-like republicanism, he is of the modern world in the attention which he gives to the disastrous and painful loves, the perverse and tormented and fugitive and weary loves which have formed so large a part of man's burden through all his time on earth. Modern fiction concerns itself more and more with this subject, which Swinburne was one of the first to introduce into English literature. I am inclined to feel that prose fiction is a better medium for the purpose than is poetry, for minute analysis would seem the most profitable method of treatment. However, Swinburne's "Anactoria" is a refutation of any claim that these things may not properly be handled in poetry. The subject is Lesbianism and sadism and Sappho's verse. The power of poetry to transmute earthly things by showing them under the forms of the spirit could not be made more clear than in this singular poem. A prose paraphrase might easily seem lascivious and rather startling. The verse itself, if read aloud, if experienced, has a quality of exaltation and—when the subject is Sappho's poetry—of enthusiasm which it cannot be anything but beneficial to share. I shall

quote the concluding lines, where Sappho is lamenting the insatiability of her passion. If the reader will imagine to himself how Mr. Aldous Huxley—the author of *Leda*—might have handled the subject, Swinburne's treatment will suggest a great deal as to the purifying effect of poetry:

Alas, that neither moon, nor snow, nor dew
Nor all cold things can purge me wholly through,
Assuage me, nor allay me, nor appease,
Till supreme sleep shall bring me bloodless ease;
Till time wax faint in all his periods;
Till fate undo the bondage of the gods,
And lay, to slake and satiate me all through,
Lotos and Lethe on my lips like dew,
And shed around and over and under me
Thick darkness and the insuperable sea.

2

Although Hardy was born only three years after Swinburne, it is clear that he belongs to the present, and Swinburne to the past. This difference has nothing to do with Hardy's longevity, for if he had died in 1909, and Swinburne in 1928, Hardy would still be a contemporary figure, and Swinburne a late Victorian. The explanation is this: Swinburne had faith and hope and enthusiasm, somewhat tempered, to be sure, by his mournful view of the influence of love in human life, but still strong enough to dominate most of his better poetry. Hardy, on the other hand, had none of these. I am told that he sometimes called himself a member of the Church of England; but in view of his many volumes of poetry, wherein his conception of life and fate is pictured over and over again, I can only imagine that this must have been one of his "little ironies." In 1922 Hardy stated, clearly and in prose, the limit to which his faith could aspire:

Whether the human and kindred animal races survive till the exhaustion and destruction of the globe, or whether these races perish

and are succeeded by others before that conclusion comes, pain to all upon it, tongued or dumb, shall be kept down to a minimum by lovingkindness, operating through scientific knowledge, and actuated by the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life when the mighty necessitating forces—unconscious or other—that have “the balancings of the clouds,” happen to be in equilibrium, which may or may not be often.

In this sentence there has been compressed most of the spirit of “these disordered years of our prematurely afflicted century.” If the various implications of the sentence are made clear, and then illustrated from Hardy’s poetry, it will be obvious why Hardy has been the high priest of so many poets and thinkers in this first third of the Twentieth Century. . . . Careful and painstaking scepticism is perhaps the most striking characteristic of this profession of faith: “the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life,” the equilibrium of the necessitating forces, “which may or may not be often”—here is a melancholy and heart-oppressing statement. The spirit of it reminds me of a dramatic moment in Mr. Galsworthy’s “Escape,” when the parson ventures this conclusion: “Something wrong there; or is it something right?” This is about as far as “lovingkindness operating through scientific knowledge” can go: the beginning of a simple human gesture, frustrated by second thought. In another place, Mr. Hardy writes:

It may be a forlorn hope, a mere dream, that of an alliance between religion, which must be retained unless the world is to perish, and complete rationality, which must come, unless also the world is to perish, by means of the interfusing effect of poetry—“the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; the impassioned expression of science.”

If I understand Hardy’s meaning in this sentence, it is certainly a “mere dream” he is describing, because religion and complete rationality, properly understood, can be neither allies nor enemies: they are simply incommensurate, and will not come together. We may have both religion and science

in our lives simultaneously, and both may flourish, but we may not have scientific religion or religious science. "Loving-kindness operating through scientific knowledge"—the phrase is surely more suggestive of compulsory vaccination than of Christian love. And as for "the interfusing effect of poetry," it can not operate in this sphere. Poetry might help to fuse religion and worldly experience by leading a man, along the pathway of the imagination, from experience toward religion. But it cannot lead a man from "complete rationality" to religion, because there is no road connecting those two. It is as if Shelley were asked to "fuse" David Hume with St. Francis.

Two other aspects of Hardy's statement should be noticed. Firstly, the centre of the whole thing, the clause for which all the others are either qualification or apology, is this, "pain to all upon it [the globe], tongued or dumb, shall be kept down to a minimum." Such a desire might be part of any man's ambition, in any civilised period; but it could only become the paramount aim and purpose of man in an age which is innocent of religion. That we should all conspire together to have as little pain as possible—this may be an intelligent way of facing a dangerous and pain-fraught life; but it is not the religious way. For the primary concern of religion is the individual's relationship with God. This may condition, and direct, all of his relationship with man; but nevertheless, if God is ignored, or denied, and man's relationship to man—on however noble a plane—made the fundamental issue, it is not religion which will result, but social service. I am not attempting to attack anything in this statement, but merely to analyse; for it seems to me that the way many of our churches are being given over more and more to forwarding such settlement work shows again how thoroughly Hardy mirrors this age, and also how unreligious an age it is. . . . Lastly, it is worth noting the fatalism of Hardy which underlies this, as well as all his other, expressions of belief. The

"modicum of free will," the "necessitating forces" which control life, perhaps consciously, perhaps blindly, these are the expressions of fatalism; and when we turn to Hardy's poetry we shall find fatalism permeating his universe. To recapitulate: Hardy's confession of faith is a statement of semi-agnosticism, of fatalism, of a desire to combine science with religion and to find a meaning for life in the mere combating of pain. Obviously, such a view of the world must result in some form of negation, unless its author believed firmly in evolution and took comfort in the contemplation of a far-off divine event towards which creation moves. In one place, Hardy speaks of himself as a "meliorist," but again I am led to wonder whether he is not joking, in view of the inex-pungable despair which colours his novels and his poems alike, and in view especially of such a poem as "A Night of Questionings," which was included in his last published volume. The poem tells how, on the eve of All Souls' Day, the dead in various parts of the world question "the dark and doubling wind" as to the state of affairs on earth. The answer is always an unhappy one, and the poem culminates in the following two stanzas:

Said, too, on the self-same eve
The troubled skulls that heave
And fust in the flats of France,
To the wind wayfaring over
Listlessly as in trance
From the Ardennes to Dover,
"What of the world now?"
And the farer moaned: "As when
You mauled these fields, do men
Set them with dark-drawn breaths
To knave their neighbours' deaths
In periodic spasms!
Yea, fooled by foul phantasms,
In a strange cyclic throe
Backward to type they go:—
No more I know."

That night, too, men whose crimes
 Had cut them off betimes,
 Who lay within the pales
 Of town and county jails
 With the rope-groove on them yet,
 Said to the same wind's fret
 "What of the world now?"
 And the blast in its brooding tone
 Returned: "Men have not shown,
 Since you were stretched that morning,
 A white cap your adorning
 More lovely deeds or true
 Through thus neck-knotting you;
 Or that they purer grow,
 Or ever will, I trow!—
 No more I know."

So much for Hardy's meliorism; we are left with a world which appears to offer as much pain, and as little meaning, for the future as for the present and the past. Such a world has few inducements for the poet; for poetry—as we have seen again and again—is a spiritual activity which uses, and transforms, the inert world of fact. But in Hardy's world the spirit must be a disenamoured and down-drooping object, so how can it impart value or beauty to the matter which it contemplates? I should say that it can only do this occasionally, and in brief poems, such as those in which Mr. Housman has succeeded so signally. But on the grand scale, it seems to me that the poetry of a man with such a philosophy is bound to fail. A consideration of "The Dynasts" will show what I mean.

This astounding epic-drama begins with a foreshadowing in the Overworld, during which the Spirit of the Years speaks the following lines:¹

¹ Of the various abstractions, called Spirits, who comment on the action throughout "The Dynasts," Hardy says, "Their doctrines are but tentative, and are advanced with little eye to a systematised philosophy warranted to lift 'the burthen of the mystery' of this unintelligible world." It is not fair, therefore, to consider their remarks as Hardy's conclusions, but they may certainly be interpreted as Hardy's tentative comments.

Nay. In the Foretime, even to the germ of Being,
Nothing appears of shape to indicate
That cognizance has marshalled things terrene,
Or will (such is my thinking) in my span.
Rather they show that, like a knitter drowsed,
Whose fingers play in skilled unmindfulness,
The Will has woven with an absent heed
Since life first was; and ever will so weave.

After this somewhat disheartening warning, the vast story unfolds. As history, it is arousing, and includes one of the most living interpretations of Napoleon that has yet been made. As a story it is effectively and compellingly told. But its real power and importance—and its *raison d'être*, if the innumerable comments by the Spirits may be trusted—is as a parable on the painfulness and inconsequentiality of human life. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy has a description—which is only saved by his superb style from becoming a burlesque of himself—of

strange birds from behind the North Pole [who descended upon England during an unusual spell of dry frost], gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes—eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions, of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived, in curdling temperatures that no man could endure; which had beheld the crash of ice-bergs and the slide of snow-hills by the shooting light of the Aurora; been half blinded by the whirl of colossal storms and terraqueous distortions; and retained the expression of feature that such scenes had engendered.

Those unhappy birds, I feel, had looked upon scenes which were gentle and reassuring compared to what an imaginative man must contemplate while reading "The Dynasts." It might be possible for some people to take this epic-drama merely as a story; but if once the imagination is allowed to operate, the picture which unfolds of those terrible ten years between Trafalgar and Waterloo is the most painstakingly horrible presentation of human life which I have encountered. For throughout all that colossal effort—perhaps the greatest

burst of energy which Europe has displayed—everything and everybody, as seen by the harassed reader, is trivial and entirely without significance. No one escapes this doom of inconsequentiality, no matter how enormous his travail: Fox appears to be on the point of accomplishing something for peace and sanity, but he is swept from the board by an uninterested Destiny. . . . Napoleon, after his first abdication, attempts the pleasing Roman gesture of suicide:

Plutarchian heroes outstayed not their fame,
And what nor Brutus nor Themistocles
Nor Cato nor Mark Antony survived,
Why, why should I?

But the poison which he has long carried with him has weakened with age; so he is discovered in time, and revived by being shaken until he vomits, in order that he may cause the deaths of many thousands more, and then decline slowly and ignominiously on St. Helena. . . . Josephine, who has lived frivolously and unwell, has a noble impulse at the end, for she would go to Napoleon when all had deserted him—his brave marshals and his humble servants and the wife for whom he had abandoned Josephine—she would go to him and prove that Europe could produce one loyal act if it could produce no other lovely thing; but Josephine was too ill, and died expressing her good intentions. . . . Marshal Ney is pictured in the splendour of his last charge—one of the romantic episodes of human story—but we are reminded that it was ill-timed and unnecessary, and we are shown how Ney, asking nothing of his adventure save death, is denied that, being reserved for execution at the hands of the absurd Bourbons:

SPIRIT OF RUMOUR

That hatless, smoke-smirched shape
There in the vale, is the still living Ney,
His sabre broken in his hand, his clothes

Slitten with ploughing ball and bayonet,
 One epaulette shorn away. He calls out, "Follow!"
 And a devoted handful follow him
 Once more into the carnage. Hear his voice.

NEY (*calling afar*)

My friends, see how a Marshal of France can die!

And for fear some one may have forgotten the sequel, Hardy recalls just how this Marshal of France does die. But Hardy is not too obvious in his art; he leaves the reader to make for himself the comparison between the purposeless end of Fox, who might have saved Europe, and the purposeless continuation of Ney, who had lost his fight and seen the Old Guard dwindle around him from thousands to a "handful." But death was unattainable; Ney was being saved for another "little irony." Nothing escapes this implacable minimising, yet we are not allowed to think that there may be even a negative purpose at work, for the Spirits are forever asserting that all this vast madness which It—Destiny—has contrived through its drowsed knitting is quite without purpose, and that any other plan might have been substituted:

Something hidden urged
 The giving matter motion; and these coils
 Are, maybe, good as any.

And as a background to this we see the people, whose lot it is to die hideously all over the continent of Europe and out on the Atlantic Ocean, to die by thousands, and ten thousands, and finally, in Russia, to die by hundred thousands, to die of disease and cold and thirst and starvation, as well as by the more usual methods of slaughter: and all for a cause which nobody on earth or in the Overworld could possibly define. It is not Napoleon's doing. Starting on the Russian campaign, he calls himself the tool of fate, driven on without personal volition:

That which has worked will work!—Since Lodi Bridge
 The force I then felt move me moves me on
 Whether I will or no; and oftentimes
 Against my better mind. . . . Why am I here?
 —By laws imposed on me inexorably.

And in another place:

We are but thistle-globes on Heaven's high gales,
 And whither blown, or when, or how, or why,
 Can choose us not at all!

And the Spirit of the Years agrees with Napoleon, saying
 that he is

as the brazen rod that stirs the fire
 Because it must.

Also, after another of Napoleon's fatalistic remarks, the Spirit
 comments,

He's of the few in Europe who discern
 The working of the Will.

This fatalism is not much alleviated when, at the close of the
 drama, we return to the Overworld, where the Spirits argue
 whether It—Fate—will always be inadvertent, or whether it
 may develop consciousness, and hence an interest in affairs,
 after the passage of eternities:

SPIRIT OF THE PITIES

Shall blankness be for aye?
 Men gained cognition with the flux of time,
 And wherefore not the Force informing them,
 When far-ranged æons past all fathoming
 Shall have swung by, and stand as backward years?

The Spirit of the Years thinks that this is childish optimism,
 and the Spirit Ironical is amused; but the Semichorus of the
 Years is inclined to feel that the time may come when con-
 sciousness will inform the Will. This, I suppose, is what

Hardy means by his meliorism: that it is a tenable opinion that after "æons past all fathoming" Fate, which causes everything, may have gained some awareness of what it is causing.

If the birds from behind the North Pole had witnessed more fearful spectacles than those ten years of European history, as presented by Hardy, it is no wonder that they became "gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes." It is worth pointing out that Hardy has not merely taken his history as he found it; the horror of his picture can not all be blamed upon reality; Hardy has rejected many incidents, and among them are all the incidents which might have given a suggestion of order or sanity. He could find room in his enormous play to picture the fatuousness of English society and the vulgar grossness of the English and Spanish courts; he could find room to picture the fearful though historically unimportant episode at Walcheren, when an English commander led forty thousand troops into a fever-cursed swamp-land, where Napoleon would not send a single Frenchman, and where they almost all rotted away with disease before the year was out. But Hardy found no room to show Napoleon's constructive work. No one would learn from "The Dynasts" that Napoleon was anything but an unbalanced, blood-drenched dupe of fate, driven to destroy himself and most of Europe. That Napoleon had a Roman care for order, that he brought system into a sprawling chaos, and that he worked with as much ardour over a law-code as over a military campaign—all this Hardy ignored. His mind may have rejected it quite unconsciously, because such activity suggests that there may sometimes be a relation between man's intentions and man's accomplishments, and such a suggestion would be alien to the entire poem.¹ When the Spirit of the Pities laments

¹ It is interesting to see that Carlyle, proceeding on suppositions that are the reverse of Hardy's, finds that the only truly noteworthy aspects of Napoleon's career are those which "The Dynasts" neglects.

the intolerable antilogy
Of making figments feel,

it is rebuked by the Spirit of the Years for assuming that It—the Will—had any *intention* of making Its figments feel, or of anything in particular:

The cognizance ye mourn, Life's doom to feel,
If I report it meetly, came unmeant,
Emerging with blind gropes from impercipience
By listless sequence—luckless, tragic Chance,
In your more human tongue.

In other words, the human race has had very bad luck, but there is no use in blaming It.

I have given so much space to "The Dynasts" because in it I find a complete picture of the universe as seen by Hardy. This picture coincides with the picture suggested by his prose confession of faith which I quoted above, and so I think it is fair to assume that a just judgment may be made thereupon. There have been a number of attempts to show that Hardy was not a true pessimist—due perhaps to the fact that Hardy himself resented that epithet. It seems to me best to side-step the controversy by avoiding the use of the word "pessimist," and to describe Hardy as a man who believed in fatalism, and who conceived of human life not only as very painful (the Hebrew prophets, and most other people, would agree with that) but as quite literally insignificant, since it represents neither man's struggle to attain moral worth, nor any purpose of a superior Being, but merely the maunderings of an "unmotiv'd, dominant Thing."¹ In this belief Hardy stands as the representative of a very large group in the early Twentieth Century. The fact that he was a great man, with a noble and austere spirit, has obscured his in-

¹ The problem of how the *appearance* of free will can be reconciled with the *fact* of fatalism is most ingeniously handled in the fore scene to "The Dynasts," and this same scene suggests how very little is probably meant by the "modicum of free will" referred to in the prose credo.

tellectual relationship with the Aldous Huxley group; but is it not true that the sentence in which I have just described Hardy's picture of the universe would be equally applicable to the author of *Antic Hay*? It is in his emphasis on man's insignificance that Hardy is so thoroughly a figure of the day. Fatalism man has struggled with before, and the painfulness of life he has always borne, but the special mark of our contemporary disease is an overwhelming conviction of insignificance. We have lost the power to believe in ourselves as moral agents, and we know that if we are not moral agents we are nothing but animated mechanisms creeping dejectedly across an aging moon, mechanisms whose proud self-consciousness

came unmeant,
Emerging with blind gropes from impercipience
By listless sequence,

and distinguishing us from the other animals only by making us aware of our plight. Of all the writers who have gone to this extreme in their conception of man's insignificance—and there are many of them to-day—Hardy has maintained the noblest attitude. He has not descended to cries for pity, or to gestures of defiance or indifference, and neither has the worth of his nature been affected by the irresponsibility which such a view of life entails. He has presented his picture of the world, and meanwhile, both in his work and in his life, he has shown that a man may conduct himself with dignity even under such circumstances. If the world were really such a place as Hardy pictured it, and if mankind were doomed to learn at last that this is the case, Hardy's poetry might become a precious treasure, showing how much of value may be created even in a valueless world. But since this is not the case, since man will not be required to adjust himself to a universe in which he is an animated mechanism, I think it unlikely that Hardy's poetry will ever be ranked extremely

high. He will attain the immortality of a writer who perfectly represents one of the main trends of his age, and who does this quite unconsciously, simply because the spirit which has made the age has made him also; and he will always be looked upon as a fine and splendid soul with great poetic capacity; but I do not believe that it will be the verdict of time that this capacity was realised, except occasionally in a brief and desultory fashion. For poetry ministers to that faculty which seeks *value, significance*, whereas Hardy's philosophy endowed life with ultimate valuelessness and insignificance. Building on such a calamitous foundation, it is not possible to erect very great poetry; the wonder is that Hardy accomplished as much as he did. For in a number of short pieces, he surmounted his philosophical difficulties and achieved poetry. The following is an example:

THE OXEN

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.
We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in the strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.
So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years. Yet, I feel,
If some one said on Christmas Eve,
"Come: see the oxen kneel
In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

The form of this, and of the other quotations from Hardy which I have used, illustrate the simplicity and directness both

in language and metre for which Hardy stands, and by which again he is one with a dominant trend of the contemporary world. There was danger, after Swinburne and Rossetti, that writers might confuse metrical elaboration or verbal charm with poetry. Hardy himself was occasionally affected by this heresy, as when he wrote a battle description in Sapphics—apparently hoping that the uninspired material would be enlivened by the complicated beauty of the form. But for the most part Hardy, like Mr. Housman, served to re-establish the vogue for simplicity; so that henceforth poets can enjoy the broadening of the metrical range of English which Swinburne accomplished, without feeling in the least constrained to attempt Swinburnian effects.

3

I stated a little way back that man will not be required to adjust himself to a world in which he is an animated mechanism. The statement will probably be challenged, since many people to-day, including a slightly important school of psychologists, are of the opinion that man will soon be required to do just that thing. Therefore I shall discuss here this question which I have been sidestepping ever since Chapter One—sidestepping because I wished to have a considerable body of poetry well in hand, and in the reader's mind, before discussing it. The question is a fundamental one; namely, how can the view of poetry which is presented in this book be reconciled to, or else how can it combat, such modern philosophies as behaviourism, or advanced pragmatism, and such fatalistic views of human life as are found in the works of Hardy and Dr. Spengler? In other words, what justification can be made for an esthetic theory which depends upon conceptions such as consciousness and free will, in a world which tends more and more to regard consciousness as a function of brain-chemistry, and free will as a childish legacy from religion?

When I wrote, in the first chapter of this book, that beauty is "a manifestation of the highest perfection," and that the artist who apprehends beauty will have therefore a vision of harmony in the midst of disorder, and of perdurable value in the midst of flux, I was saying something which takes for granted that man's spirit is not a by-product of his physical nature, but that on the contrary man is a self-conscious moral agent, in whose life choice has a real meaning, and whose intuitions can not be dismissed as the function of some obscure chemical or physical activity. I should defend these presuppositions as follows:¹

The evidence which is put forward in defence of the mechanistic interpretation of life—the interpretation which asserts, in the words of Mr. John Watson, that psychology "is a purely objective, experimental branch of natural science which needs consciousness as little as do the sciences of chemistry and physics"—consists in an attempt to prove that all of man's actions, including those which appear to have spiritual or religious motivation, may actually be caused by physical or chemical agents within himself, or in his environment. For instance, Jacques Loeb, discussing people who are willing to sacrifice their lives for an ideal, writes: "It might be possible that under the influence of certain ideas chemical changes, for instance, internal secretions within the body, are produced which increase the sensitiveness to certain stimuli to such an unusual degree that such people become slaves to certain stimuli just as the copepods (small crustaceans) become slaves to the light when carbon dioxide is added to the water."² In other words, these thinkers seek to explain any activity

¹ Again I wish it to be understood that my argument is not intended to be anything more than a rationalisation. I reached the conclusions I am discussing on intuitive grounds—if I had not I should have little confidence in them—and they are not the type of conclusions which can be proved in the sense that a problem in plane geometry can be proved. But if I suggest grounds for trusting such intuitions, and show how they may be defended against rationalistic attack, I trust that others may be aided in reaching, or maintaining, similar conclusions.

² Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*.

of man—whether physical, mental, spiritual—as the result of something chemical or mechanical, of something which may be isolated and analysed in the laboratory. Once this view is adopted, belief in man's free will must be abandoned, and man's consciousness becomes, as Mr. Watson says, of no importance to psychology. For according to these theories, nothing is determined by what man thinks or feels;¹ it is the uncontrollable chemical or mechanical elements which make him love God, or murder his wife. Once free will and consciousness have been ruled out—the one as non-existent, the other as unimportant—man ceases to be a moral agent, and can only be judged pragmatically, as useful, or annoying, or whatever the case may be. In this fashion science, or rather an alleged branch thereof, reaches the same conclusions as to man's place in the universe as were reached by Hardy. It does not matter whether the tale is illustrated by means of "small crustaceans," or by means of kings and emperors, the same mechanical fatalism is here and the same conception of man as completely insignificant. It is clear that this view leaves no place for beauty as a revelation of perfection or a hint of divinity; for since man's consciousness is an unimportant accident, he can not through its means, or through any other means, attain to what I have called higher knowledge. He is bound forever within the realm of physical causality which environs him, and art—like religion—becomes a plaything which should only be judged on the grounds of how pleasantly, and how harmlessly, it distracts him.

The initial weakness of this argument—barring the fundamental contradiction which I have already pointed out—lies in the conception of cause and effect. When a man of science

¹ It is strange that these people who deny the significance of consciousness, and hence of mental action, should erect such portentous theories on the basis of their own mental action. For if consciousness is insignificant, its findings must be insignificant—barring unprovable accident. And if its findings are insignificant, the data by which its insignificance has been proved is itself insignificant, and the whole argument falls.

uses the word *cause*, as in the statement, " x causes y ," he means that x immediately and invariably precedes y —under any conditions that can be devised—and that nothing other than x invariably precedes y , and furthermore that no other contributing factor can be discovered or imagined. If these conditions are satisfied, then " x causes y ," regardless of the question as to *why* x causes y . For example, when sulphuric acid is added to alcohol, at the proper temperature, the alcohol changes to ether; and the addition of the sulphuric acid is said to *cause* the change. Over and again the experiment may be repeated, and always, at the introduction of the sulphuric acid, the change takes place—the introduction of the acid *invariably* and *immediately* preceding the change, and no other factor being discoverable. This is, strictly, the only sense in which the word *cause* can be used in science, and it will be seen that the *cause*, in this sense, is merely a description of the conditions under which something appears to happen. In other words, " x causes y " really means this: "when x happens, y always happens immediately afterward, and there do not seem to be any other factors involved." Then, if any one should discover a new factor in the situation, the description of conditions would have to be rewritten, and instead of " x causes y ," we should have " z causes y ."

On the basis of all this, it must be clear that though the word *cause* can occasionally be used—in this restricted and immediate sense—in relation to the purely physical world, it becomes fantastic as soon as it is applied, in this sense, to human beings. For any human activity, and particularly any spiritual state, will have such a medley of preceding events, both physical and psychic, that no man will ever know when he has analysed them all out. Let us assume that every man who has ever loved God can be shown to have had a certain peculiar chemical in his blood, and to have developed it immediately before he loved God. It might then be possible to say, in this special meaning of the word, that the

chemical element was *one* of the causes of the love. But how could it ever be said that it was *the* cause, when there is no way of exploring the field and determining whether one or more of the manifold psychic antecedents of the religious emotion were also invariable? It is clear, for instance, that whenever love is aroused—whether it be religious love or worldly—a great variety of psychic states will have preceded this culmination. And it is also clear, I imagine, that no one can claim to have examined all these states—both those of which the individual is conscious and those of which he is totally unaware—and to have discovered whether or not any of them are invariably present. Therefore it remains possible that in addition to the physical changes which we have assumed, psychic changes are also among the causes of this, and of any other, spiritual state. What, then, is the mechanist doing when he excludes the possibility of this psychic cause and adopts the hypothesis that man's actions can be explained by chemistry and physics and mechanics? He is doing what ought to condemn him to a peculiarly unpleasing scientific hell. He is simplifying in order to attain results. A clear illustration of this can be found in behaviourism, a rather inferior branch of mechanistic thought. Because the study which, ironically enough, they call psychology does not lend itself to the objective experimental methods of pure science unless the "psyche" is dropped overboard, the behaviourists proceed to do exactly that, and then to state proudly, in the words of Mr. Watson, that "this suggested elimination of states of consciousness as proper objects of investigation in themselves will remove the barrier which exists between psychology and the other sciences."

There are, of course, many experimental psychologists who do not pretend to explain the actions, or to dispense with the spirit, of man. They are merely collecting evidence as to the effect of man's physical nature on his spiritual life, and they are not hazarding conclusions. I see no reason for quar-

relling with these people so long as they do not claim that their work has any but a purely practical value. It is the man who creates a system and an explanation of the human soul on the basis of all this bottle-washing whom I should call a fraud.

So far I have only attempted to show why the mechanistic philosophies need not be accepted, by pointing out that their conclusions are neither inevitable nor particularly logical, since they are the result of an unwarranted simplification—a simplification which I should not attack except that it pretends to be a result of sound scientific reasoning. The human mind, seeking to explain the unexplainable, is bound to adopt a simplification of some sort; but it is not bound to assert that this private weakness is backed by the authority of science. The man who does this is either fooling himself grossly, or else he is preying upon the superstition of the modern world precisely as the vender of false relics preyed upon the superstition of the Fourteenth Century. . . . So much for the reasons why mechanism *need* not be accepted. I shall now give my grounds for believing that it *must* not be accepted.

Every one has a tendency to simplify, either in the direction of a physical explanation of all things or else in the direction of a psychic¹ explanation of all things. This is due to the fact that human life is an infinitely complicated mixture of the two elements, physical and psychic, inextricably interfused, so far as we can see, and that, therefore, if we insist upon an explanation which will cover the facts, and which can be stated in terms of reason, these facts will first have to be pared down to something which our minds can encompass. Of this paring process, behaviourism represents the *reductio ad absurdum* in one direction, Christian Science Mind Healing² in

¹ By *psychic* I mean the opposite of *material*—in other words, what many people would call *spiritual*. But I reserve *spiritual* for the meaning given it in Part One, Chapter One, that is, for the harmonious co-operation of all the personality which enables one to see things in their truth—whereas the *psychic* view, misapplied, may be as false as the *material*.

² This is based on the doctrine of the unreality or non-existence of the physical—exactly the opposite pole from mechanism.

the other. But everybody who thinks deeply about man and life has probably effected a partial simplification of his own—not as absurd a simplification as those which I have mentioned, of course, but still a simplification, because by no other means can our restricted minds deal with this limitless problem. Whether a man's private philosophy tends toward denying the importance of the physical, or toward denying the importance of the psychic, or whether he maintains a middle course and tries to give to each at least some of its due, will depend upon whether the man seeks for knowledge by means of pure reason, or by means of pure intuition, or whether he seeks for it by a combination of the two. Pure reason can lead to knowledge of nothing but the non-spiritual, and a person who puts his faith in such knowledge will sooner or later become some form of materialist. Pure intuition may lead to any result, great or small. It can not be easily condemned, since it may produce a Blake; but neither can it be recommended, since it may also produce the type of "religion" which flourishes in the environs of Los Angeles. But there remains the attitude which it has been one of the chief purposes of this book to recommend: the recognition that when life is approached by means of the spirit—as in religion, and poetry, and the other arts—a sense of value may be gained, and of moral worth, and an understanding of man's place in nature, and of his obligations; whereas when life is approached by means of pure reason—as in science—useful and interesting and spiritually stimulating knowledge may be gained, such as the method by which yellow fever is transmitted, or the theories as to the working of the solar system, or the probable weight of a brontosaurus. To this should be added a realisation that when conflicts arise between the findings of science and the findings of the spirit they will often be found, on analysis, to be spurious and unreal conflicts, but that sometimes they will be real, and in that case a man must make his choice as to which guide he

will follow, according to the light that is in him. For example, a clear-cut issue should always be possible to resolve. There is no difficulty in deciding that the question of immortality should be handled via intuition, and the question of the chemistry of the blood via reason. It is on the middle ground, between such extremes, that the critical situations arise. Science can build up a fairly powerful case for mechanistic fatalism. It is not by any means a proof, as I have attempted to show; but it is a strong case.¹ On the other hand, most people have within them a clear and undeniable intuition as to the importance of consciousness and free will. Here is a genuine dilemma, for no man can follow both of these teachings at once, and since neither of them can be proved—or disproved—a choice must be made according to the individual's inclination. Shall he follow Hardy and many modern philosophers and men of science down a road which must eventually lead to the assertion that man is insignificant and irresponsible and that some form of hedonism or utilitarianism or pragmatism—they are shifting forms of the same thing—is the only possible source of value; or shall he follow such thinkers as we have been considering in this book, and accept the belief that man has volition, and is therefore a moral agent, that he may attain to glimpses of perfection lying beyond the disordered world around him, and that his life therefore may possess dignity and worth regardless of how weak he is, or how inconspicuous, regardless of how completely he seems lost in endless and uncongenial matter? Phrased in this way, the question seems to answer itself; yet many men, to-day, are making the first choice. There are two main reasons for this—both of them, it seems to me, being bad. In the first place the mistaken notion is abroad that it is more “scientific” to be some form

¹ If it were a genuine *proof*, that is, a demonstration that satisfied the imagination while at the same time it convinced the reason, there would be no conflict, for it would no longer be a field where intuition could properly operate.

of mechanist than to be a believer in free will—and emulating science is clearly the order of the day. If to be scientific means to be accurate, to be cautious, to refrain from any conclusion which can not be proved experimentally or which does not appear to follow inevitably from all available facts—then mechanism, as I have tried to show, is no whit more scientific than Mind Healing.¹ Many of its details are based upon scientific data and buttressed by scientific experiment, but its fundamental assumption is made on faith, and is in no way to be preferred, *a priori*, even by the worshipper of science, to the fundamental assumption of the believer in consciousness and individualism. . . . A second reason why many people repudiate faith in free will and choose to have faith in some form of mechanistic fatalism is that the latter has come to be associated in their minds with modernity and progress. That the latest thing is the most advanced thing is the favourite contemporary superstition, and it is very easy to show how this singular belief arose: it is a translation into the spiritual realm of something which is true enough in the physical. The mechanical world has been undergoing a continuous revolution for the last hundred and fifty years, and the large majority of changes produced by this revolution have represented mechanical improvements. A consideration of ten years in the history of the airplane, or the radio, or the farm tractor, will show clearly enough why people associate physical change with progress. And that this association should be transferred bodily from the physical to the spiritual realm is a just comment upon the depth of our spiritual awareness. . . .

Through all this long argument I have been trying to clear the ground for the following statement: When, in the world to-day, a man finds himself at the crossroads where we must all sometime come, finds himself compelled to choose be-

¹ This is nothing against mechanism, so long as it does not pretend to be scientific—as it usually does.

tween the way of poetry and religion on the one hand and the way of mechanical fatalism on the other, he should make his choice—unhampered by any superstitious belief that the way of fatalism is either the more reasonable or the more progressive—according to the dominant impulse within him and according to his judgment as to which way will produce a worthier life. He may find that the impulses within him lead both ways, for most of us are dowered with opposing instincts, one toward submission to a blind biologic fate and one toward assertion of free will and moral worth. But if he allows himself to consider the question of which produces the worthier life, I do not see on what grounds he can remain in doubt.¹ It does not seem to me to be an exaggeration to say that on the one side is life and on the other death. And it is here that the glorification of poetry, which this book has attempted, finds its justification; for the story of the world's great poetry—as has been illustrated in the samples of English poetry which we have discussed here—is the story of a continuous affirmation of the way of life. Under many forms, in the terms of many different views of life, poets have used the supermaterial world in order to interpret the beauties of the material world which they have always so much loved. Even Hardy did this occasionally, in fugitive pieces, perhaps unaware of what he was about. But in his major works, and especially in his most extended effort, "The Dynasts," Hardy was constrained by his philosophy to interpret human life in terms of materialism and insignificance. The result is work which leaves the reader with admiration and respect for the author, but with a feeling of barrenness.

It should be clear now in what sense I interpret the quotation from Matthew Arnold with which this book begins,

¹ I do not mean to suggest, in this passage, that a man may choose either course, and that he should follow his preference because it makes little difference which he chooses. That would be pragmatism. What I wish to say is that a man may choose either course, but that he should cultivate the correct preference, since it makes *all* the difference which he chooses.

in what sense I believe that "we should conceive of poetry as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto." And it also should be clear why I feel it of particular importance that, in the modern world, this high destiny of poetry be recognised and be realised. For a variety of causes—all of which are connected directly or indirectly with science and the industrial revolution—the modern world is threatened with widespread diminution of its spiritual power. And the agencies with which this diminution must be combated are neither very numerous nor very active. Among these agencies is poetry; but for the time being poetry appears to have sold its birthright, or at least to have exposed it for sale. To what extent this has happened, and how, and why, will be discussed in the next chapter, where an attempt will be made to discredit the various movements which have led poetry along one false trail after another. For the remainder of this chapter, I wish to discuss in some detail my statement that our present world "is threatened with a widespread diminution of its spiritual power."

This is a statement that has been made so often that to many people it must have begun to seem untrue. Yet it is not untrue, according to any definition of spiritual power which I can conceive. The reason for its truth, however, is not that the modern man is in any way depraved, but that the physical conditions of life make spirituality peculiarly difficult, because they make worldliness more easy, more attractive, more widely accessible than it has ever been before. Many men surmount these temptations, of course; but a far larger number are distracted by them. It is precisely the situation described in Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar Gypsy," except that all the conditions which he lamented then have become seven times more threatening to-day. It takes a vigilant and self-conscious purpose, or else a natural inclination that can scarcely be denied, to maintain an active

spiritual life in a world of industrial progress such as ours. For this progress in the first place makes it unnecessary for most people ever to be long alone and undistracted, and in the second place offers the reward of moderate wealth and a respected position to a very large number of people in return for their exhausting all their better energies upon material pursuits, and in the third place tends steadily to transform life from rural into urban conditions, so that the very poor in our society can go through months of their lives without ever coming into contact with anything—in the non-human realm—more natural and soul-healing than a street-car. These are but a few of the general and obvious effects of industrialism, and they all tend in the same direction, namely, to encourage the desultoriness and diffusion which under the most favouring conditions we all have difficulty in overcoming, and which, if indulged, are sure to render our spiritual life more and more nebulous. For among the normal conditions of spirituality are “concentration of thought, indifference to fortune and reputation, warmth of temperament . . . disciplined into chastity and renunciation.” All of these states are perfectly compatible with modern life, but they are by no means the natural result of such life, so they need to be kept steadily in mind as a conscious intention, except in the case of people so naturally gifted in that direction that there is no chance of their being led astray. And in this connection the “higher destinies” of poetry are again made manifest. For in a world where material activity is so engrossing and so attractive as it is to-day, a steady protest is needed against the tendency to take our satisfaction over that activity as a sign of spiritual health. And along with this protest there should go a presentation of life under the forms and in the colours of the spirit, so that the charlatanry of the world and the world’s servants may never rest unchallenged. This book has attempted to show that poetry does characteristically do these two things. Stated in prose, it sounds as

if I were claiming that poets should confine themselves to delivering sermons against materialism. And, in a sense, that is a fairly accurate statement—for prose—as to what poetry is all about; but the sermons are delivered after the fashion of an art, instead of after the fashion of religion, which means that they are indirect and undogmatic, consisting of a presentation of the material world as it *really* is, interpenetrated by spiritual values, receiving its meaning from those values and at the same time conferring meaning upon them. In this sense "Macbeth" is a sermon against materialism, and *Paradise Lost*, and *Songs of Innocence*, and "Prometheus Unbound," and "The Scholar Gypsy," and "Atalanta in Calydon," and Hardy's "The Oxen." No one in whose life these or similar works were a vital force would be easily diverted by material distractions and display. What I am asking is that poets and readers should recognise this high destiny of poetry, and should know that in the world to-day it is more than usually important that this destiny should be pursued.

4

My last statement may arouse protest, since it implies that the other agencies which make against materialism are more than usually inactive. But is not this a just implication? Among these agencies are religion, prose literature, philosophy, and the other arts. I shall discuss the first two of these briefly, with a view to explaining why I call them spiritually inactive.

It seems to me fairly evident that religion is—temporarily—in eclipse. The lack of true spirituality which characterises the Protestant churches at least, is illustrated by the way in which they have responded to the challenge of science.¹

¹ By "the challenge of science" I mean simply the situation arising from the fact that a very large percentage of the public has been so beguiled by the triumphs and the by-products of science that they have come to feel instinctively that science can meet all the needs of humanity and minister to all the sides of our nature. This is merely one of the many ways in which materialism insinuates itself into man's thought, and by calling it "the challenge of science" I mean no disrespect to that type of learning.

Some, the Fundamentalists, have made a forlorn and rather heroic stand upon all the more material aspects of the Old Testament. It is not the true dogmas of Christianity they are defending, for these are not affected by science. The divinity of Christ, for instance, is a spiritual and not a material affirmation; but Jonah's whale and Joshua's sun are as material as a moving picture machine. How can men who conceive of Christianity in such terms as these latter, teach the world to follow the way of life rather than the way of death? But even less may be expected from the other dominant group of Protestants, who meet the world's mistaken estimate of the possibilities of science by going over to the enemy. They have discovered that there need be no *conflict* between the way of science and the way of religion, and so they assert that there is no fundamental *difference* between them. Into this folly they are probably led by a human desire to be on the popular and much-applauded side. The man of science is the most generally esteemed figure of the day; if religion and science can be shown to be similar, religion can share in some of the glory. As a result of this tendency, we find such an astounding phenomenon as the following. In January, 1928, Miss Maude Royden, a visiting English evangelist, addressed an audience in Philadelphia: I quote from the New York *World's* report ¹ of her sermon:

The congregation was urged to use in religion the same scientific methods as those employed in exploiting the riches of the country.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that the Lord's teaching is utterly scientific?" she asked. "I feel that some scientist should rewrite the life of Christ to make men realize that God spoke in the same terms as scientists."

I do not mean to suggest that the Protestant religions have come to such a pass that these remarks are typical; but nevertheless they do represent a trend. And the most surprising thing about the incident is not that somebody should have been born into this harassed world capable of speaking

¹ January 23, 1928.

those sentences, but that an audience appears to have accepted them quietly and as a matter of course, while a newspaper printed an account of them exactly as if they made sense. . . . Another example of the present weakening of religion within the churches is their tendency to devote a larger and larger proportion of their energies to forms of social service. Hardy's phrase about the reduction of pain through lovingkindness and scientific knowledge covers all such activity—a noble thing, and likely to be a by-product of the religious life in any age, but not, in itself, religion. An age in which men tend to regard Christianity as synonymous with such estimable work as that of the Y.M.C.A. may fairly be called an unspiritual age.

In prose literature, the same signs abound. A man whose view of life is fundamentally material may face the world with a noble despair, as Hardy does, and Mr. Housman. Or he may take refuge from his own philosophy by refusing to consider any fundamental questions—even by denying that there are such—while at the same time developing an extreme interest in all sorts of minutiae, an interest in minutiae for their own sake, which will serve the purpose of occupying the attention without raising any questions as to value. Frequently such a person will regard life as a trivial joke, in which pain alternates with slapstick farce. This appears to me to be the view of Mr. Aldous Huxley¹ and of Mr. Mencken. On a higher plane, we find the same result of materialism working itself out in Sir Edmund Gosse who, towards the close of his industrious and humane life, can write as follows:

By dint of gazing interminably over the vast expanse of literature I have gradually and unconsciously come to regard with equal interest all forms of passionate expression, whether grave or gay, profound or

¹ Mr. Aldous Huxley, whom I have used repeatedly as an illustration of a certain trend in modern life, appears to have changed within the last two years and to be no longer the sort of person whom I have suggested. It is the Mr. Aldous Huxley of the years preceding 1927, therefore, whom I have in mind.

superficial. I ask of books only that they should have been amusing—that is to say, competently enough executed to arrest an intelligent observer.¹

And in this country, so keen and delightful a critic as Mr. Joseph Wood Krutch describes the work of Proust, whom he reads “with almost unreserved pleasure,” as follows:

To make the most exquisitely minute discriminations always, but to judge between the things thus discriminated never—that is the essence of his method . . . exquisitely discriminated nuances which command the interest less because of any intrinsic importance in the things discriminated than because of the marvellous delicacy with which they are expressed.

This may be an acute analysis of Proust’s method; what interests me is that Mr. Krutch, finding Proust that sort of writer, should nevertheless read him “with almost unreserved pleasure.” For the person who never judges between the things discriminated, like the person who has “come to regard with equal interest all forms of passionate expression, whether . . . profound or superficial,” is a person to whom life has no clear meaning and no ultimate worth. For in a life of meaning and worth, judgment becomes a necessity. I do not mean that harshness or lack of comprehension become a necessity; but judgment, a definite preference for one way rather than another, a clear belief that certain things have merit and that certain other things do not, this is a state of mind which will accompany the spiritual way of life.² If the reader will think back over the poets discussed in this book, he will realise that they all, save possibly Hardy, possessed a sense of values such as I have been describing, whether it was expressed subjectively as in Milton and Shelley, or with the utmost objectivity, as in Shakespeare. This sense of

¹ Quoted in Mr. Van Wyck Brooks’s review of Gosse’s *Leaves and Fruit*, *New York Herald Tribune* “Books,” January 9, 1928.

² It is possible that the pure mystic contrives to transcend such judgment; but we are not dealing with mysticism either in Proust or in Sir Edmund Gosse.

values, as felt by a poet, need not imply a division of the world into blacks and whites, or indeed any dogmatism of any sort, save for the one essential dogma that life "means intensely." This it has always been the high destiny of poetry to affirm, and this is being very generally denied to-day, either clearly or implicitly, by such writers as I have been discussing.

Chapter Two

TRIVIAL SANDS

This modern world is but a thin match-board flooring spread over a shadow-hell. For Dante's hell has faded, is dead. Hell has no vastness; there are no more devils who laugh or who weep—only the maimed dwarfs of life, terrible straining mechanisms, crouching on trivial sands, and laughing at the giants crumbling!—EDITH SITWELL. Note in *Bucolic Comedies*.

I

Neither the historical nor the scientific method of criticism can be applied to the present. We are all bewildered by the pressure of the contemporaneous world, and we are all imperfect critics in that we must all stop short of seeing it whole. Existence to every human being is a welter of fact, sensation, and incomplete knowledge, and for obvious reasons, the world we now inhabit is more impossible to assimilate, more harassingly with us during every moment of our waking lives, it is more disparate and unquiet with detail, than any other world the Western civilisation has produced.

Objectively considered, it is a world the poet has to escape, but this could be said of any objective world ever inhabited by artists. The very fact that the artist is a person who is impelled to record the significance of life through some definite medium, implies that he is tempted always to be dissatisfied with those actualities of thought and sensation which sooner or later are transformed in his records to permanent realities. Living in time is always a series of discrete experiences; the day just ended is always loud with duties and inconsequent activities. The same day may later crystallise or merge into an idea or a subterraneous flow of thought which is vitally important to the artist's whole view of life; but in actual experience it is a battleground of interruptions, moods, and preoccupations, inevitable to any one who is liv-

ing in a community. Art is the abiding significance, the precious residue of daily life; but the artist naturally looks longingly before and after to such eras of society as he feels have actualised, or may actualise, those verities of the spirit for the affirmation of which art exists.

One remembers numberless instances of this dissatisfaction. Aristophanes lived in that golden age of Athens to which most poets look with envy, but the theme of "The Frogs" is one long jibe at the decadence of the contemporary poets, who, unlike the great Æschylus, (about fifty years dead) are:

. . . "Warblers of the Grove"—
 "Little, foolish fluttering things"—poor puny wretches
 That dawdle and dangle about with the tragic muse;
 Incapable of any serious meaning—
 There's not one hearty poet amongst them all
 That's fit to risk an adventurous valiant phrase.

This, of course, is directed more against the poetry of the time than the time itself, but the artist always sees the past largely in terms of its art, and thus his longing is always a mixture of desire for communication with poets dead and gone and an assumption that the life about those poets was as rich and as malleable as the art they made of it; always a belief that the past would not only have inspired him to greater work but that in the past he would have been more intelligently appreciated. Thus Petrarch, who for us is inextricably a part of another great age, wrote of himself:

. . . I dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me, so that, had it not been for the love of those dear to me, I should have preferred to have been born in any other period than our own. In order to forget my own time I have earnestly striven to place myself in spirit in other ages, and consequently I delighted in history.

Spenser, in "The Shepheard's Calender" (1579), "complayneth of the contempt of Poetrie":

But after vertue gan for age to stoope,
 And mightie manhode brought a bedde of ease;
 The vaunting Poets found nought worth a pease
 To put in preace emong the learned troupe:
 Tho gan the streames of flowing wittes to cease,
 And sonne-bright honour pend in shamefull coupe.

And if that any buddes of Poesie,
 Yet of the old stocke, gan to shoote agayne,
 Or it mens follies mote be forst to fayne,
 And rolle with rest in rymes of rybaudrye;
 Or, as it sprong, it wither must agayne:
 Tom Piper makes us better melodie.

And about the same time, Sir Philip Sidney is even more scathing in his denunciation of a world inhospitable to poetry, and wrote, in his "pittiful defence of poore Poetry, which, from almost the highest estimation of learning, is fallen to be the laughingstocke of children":

For heertofore, Poets have in England also florished. And which is to be noted, even in those times, when the trumpet of *Mars* did sounde loudest. And now, that an overfaint quietnes should seeme to strew the house for Poets, they are almost in as good reputation, as the *Mountibancks* at *Venice*. Truly even that, as of the one side, it giveth great praise to Poesie, which like *Venus*, (but to better purpose) hath rather be troubled in the net with *Mars*, then enjoy the homelie quiet of *Vulcan*: so serves it for a peece of reason, why they are lesse gratefull to idle England, which nowe can scarce endure the payne of a pen. Upon this, necessarily followeth, that base men, with servile wits undertake it: who think it inough, if they can be rewarded of the Printer . . . so these, no more but setting their names to it, by their owne disgracefulnes, disgrace the most gracefull Poesie. For now, as if all the Muses were gotte with childe, to bring foorth bastard Poets, without any commission, they doe poste over the banckes of *Helicon*, tyll they make the readers more weary then Poste-horses. . . .

The fact that these words were written in the early days of the Elizabethan Age, is a reminder of the fact that the individual is never really aware of what his contemporaries intend. He is constantly in the act of probing the world as

he sees it, for certainties and meanings; and in so far as his circumstances and his natural bias of temperament blind him to the continuity of thought, so far is he certain to err in his judgment of the age as apprehended by other artists.

The poet, as poet, lives in a world of his own making, but whatever its esoteric qualities, it is one which inescapably reflects that outer world in which he lives as a social being. For the world around him has contributed largely to his growth; and since his mind is stamped with the spirit of his age, the world his mind builds for its own habitation will necessarily bear traces of the same imprint. The forces of thought, however, the institutions that mould us, that co-operate with our natural heritage in directing our development, are deep and ultimately indefinable. The pressure of existence is another matter altogether, and its demands have always been confusing and onerous to any one whose attention is concentrated on one purpose. And so the artist is always in search of a world in which concentration is the rule rather than the exception.

In 1820, Charles Lamb deplored the meaningless haste of what he called "this excitement-craving age," and although it is important not to forget the truth of this complaint, still we have earned the right to smile as we realise what one hundred years have done toward intensifying and standardising the purposeless tempo of living. This is a subject which is now eloquent on the editorial page of every newspaper and there is no necessity for wasting time over it here. The thing to remember is that the poet has always been under the necessity of pursuing lonely thought through the clamour of many voices, of seeking significance behind the shifting phenomena of his senses; and that since his immediate surroundings are ultimately only one long interruption of his purpose, his world-sickness is only a result of the constant effort to make the moment timeless. This effort in itself I believe to be both fetter and wings, and therefore I cannot see that

our own age is in any deep sense more dangerous to poetry than any other. It demands a more strenuous effort; or, what is the same thing, a more unwavering conviction, but that demand could hinder only the minor poet—the kind of poet who speaks directly out of a society closely knit in conviction, unified in its assumption of the desirability of living and thinking to a definite purpose.

The Great Ages did not perhaps *produce* much more talent than ours; but less talent was wasted . . . in a formless age there is very little hope for the minor poet to do anything worth doing; and when I say minor I mean very good poets indeed: such as filled the Greek Anthology and the Elizabethan song-books; even a Herrick; but not merely second-rate poets. . . . Under the present conditions the minor poet has too much to do.¹

Although I have said that I see no serious reason why a poet living to-day—a man or woman having something of importance to say—should not write poetry as perfect as any written in the past, it is undeniable that our age provides some unique discomforts and hindrances to poetry; and among them is the futility, suggested in the quotation above, which is imposed upon the minor poet. In discussing this problem it will, I hope, become clear that we can never with any assurance judge contemporary poetry. It is time only that can show what the Past intended, for an intention implies movement toward another state, and as every year is a product of all previous years, it is necessary always to reevaluate the continuously simplified permanencies which we inherit. If we do not know what will be discredited, and what will prove to have been a link or a prophecy from the point of view of the man of 2028, we can not possibly know which of our poets will speak most significantly to that man. The only judgment we can make is an esthetic and personal one, and our personal judgments reflect our own prejudices and limitations. “A poet must be judged by his peers,” and it might well be

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 58.

that our age contains a poet who is peerless, and so beyond the reach of our appreciation.

Only in the ancient world was there an apparent unanimity of opinion as to which artists were great, and only in that world were the great artists crowned in person rather than in commemorative stone. The Middle Ages would seem to have welcomed all poets as entertainers, but there again we can not say with any assurance what may have been lost from their records, what false judgments were made.¹ From the time that Catholicism lost the reins of civilisation, down to the present, the controversial aspect of contemporaneous literature has become more and more emphatic, and since the advent of those dubious blessings, compulsory education and popular journalism, the confusion has turned Bedlam; so that at present any poet with the slightest claim to the title should be equally unmoved by abuse and hyperbolic praise. Indeed, the effect on reviewers of remembering the instability of criticism is such that they have grown timid, and hesitate to risk ranking themselves with either the public which welcomed Ossian and ignored Blake's lyrics, or with those villains of the early Nineteenth Century, *Quarterly Edinburgh Review*, and *Blackwoods*.

The formlessness of our age, however, is mischievous in its effects. Minor poets are not, except historically, of huge importance to any age except their own. When time has pared them down to a few pages in an anthology, they lose their major tone except for incipient Ph.D.s, and merge into a background for their more important contemporaries. But the minor poet is of enormous importance when he is alive. In the first place, he is comprehensible at once, and to many people, as genius seldom is. He may, to the eyes of posterity,

¹ Chaucer was apparently popular as soon as he was known; but Chaucer, as we have seen, was not an interpretative poet but a titanic populariser, in the best sense of that word. If it were not for the barrier of language Chaucer would, I think, be even now one of the most widely read of all our great writers.

be a charming collection of platitudes; but to his contemporaries he will express fittingly and in an intelligible idiom, ideas which are current and therefore on the edge of every one's consciousness. In the second place, he will not in his poetry show the effects of having examined radically the values of his age, and therefore his verse will not have that quality which Mr. Eliot calls "the unpleasantness of great poetry." Both these qualities will ensure the minor poet a hearing, and it is quite natural that almost every age once found in a now lesser figure, its Great Poet. Every reader will think of his own examples, but it is especially interesting to read the sonnets of William Lisle Bowles,¹ bearing in mind while reading that they inspired Coleridge and Wordsworth, that Coleridge wrote of Bowles late in life in the most extravagant terms, and at one period called him "the bard of my idolatry." I forbear to quote from these tepid productions. The fact that most general readers will never have heard of them points the moral.

. . . No models of past times, however perfect, can have the same vivid effect on the youthful mind, as the productions of contemporary genius. . . . The great works of past ages seem to a young man things of another race, in respect to which his faculties must remain passive and submissive, even as to the stars and mountains. But the writings of a contemporary, perhaps not many years older than himself, surrounded by the same circumstances, and disciplined by the same manners, possess a reality for him, and inspire an actual friendship as of a man for a man. His very admiration is the wind which fans and feeds his hope. The poems themselves assume the properties of flesh and blood. To recite, to extol, to contend for them is but the payment of a debt due to one who exists to receive it.

These are Coleridge's words² in describing his first "perusal" of Bowles's sonnets. Every one who attempts to write poetry will, I suspect, find in them a personal application. A hint of the reason for this is implicit in all that we have seen of

¹ 1762-1850.

² *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter I.

the poet's place in his time; the fact that however he may enrich the minds of later readers, we can never separate him from the time and the *milieu* which made him the figure we know. Contemporary poets, therefore, however transient their influence, do show us something caught from the world in flux; something of which we have been aware, while failing to see it with the same concentration and lucidity.

One function, then, of the modern poet is to carry on the seeds of tradition. History discovers a continuity linking together the most seemingly opposed epochs, and an unbroken chain of minor poets carries from one age to the next a progressive¹ attitude of mind. It binds together the generations, and creates an audience to which all poets may appeal. By their very existence, these minor poets stimulate others to write, and there is always the possibility that among those they inspire will be one of great capacity.

2

In the chapter preceding this, some of the dominant trends of thought in the modern world were examined, and some of the reasons for their dominance. It is clear that although those trends are dominant in that they are widespread and casually accepted in their individual manifestations, they are not necessarily permanent; not always seen for what they

¹ "The Poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that *art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same*. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a *mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind*—is a mind which changes; and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route* . . . the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show."

These words are from the chapter on "Tradition and the Individual Talent," from Mr. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*. With most of it I agree, with some of it I disagree violently. The addition of italics is my own: the first to emphasise an important truth; the second to single out in the passage the one statement I question—one which will be of importance in the later discussion of Mr. Eliot's own poetry.

really are by those who give them allegiance. They are not affirmations in which all temperaments are at home, and a thoughtful reading of contemporary verse convinces me that a large part of its anemia is due to an acceptance by the poets of attitudes of mind which belong properly to science. In other words, few of our poets have troubled to examine the premises of the world around them, and thus much of their work is superstitious and sentimental. The result of this is that our poetry is aimless, imitative of the worst in life, pre-occupied with non-essentials, and is devoted either to a false objectivity or to an equally false subjectivity. This is not by any means the whole story, but the purpose of these fragmentary comments is to discover if possible the relation between our civilisation and the blind alleys down which many of its poets are plunging.

I have tried to avoid the term *Zeitgeist*. We postulate its existence, because we are born to the historical attitude toward everything, but the words at best beg the question. However, one can scarcely discuss modern literature without using the term. Our authors seek to avoid oblivion by embodying it; pooling their hope of immortality with their confidence in the significance of our era, tacitly agreeing to live and die with their age. The reviewers and critics weary us with the term, constantly proclaiming its appearance in art, or lamenting its non-appearance. We are reminded by hundreds of books yearly that art reflects and is conditioned by the spirit of the artist's time, and we are all more or less infected with the Time-philosophy of Relativity, which asserts that art is only alive in its historical context. In so far as it is true that every work of art is, in the crucible of the mind which contemplates it, mixed with some alloy secret to the individual, this is not startlingly new. The extreme relativists, however, would have us believe that Time kills art beyond all hope of immortality. Thus, for example, to a Western man Plato is as dead as the grass-blades he may

have walked upon, and any appropriation of Plato's ideas by the modern man results, not in a subtly new thing (as might, say, the appropriation by the same man of the ideas of a contemporary) but in a set of ideas which has nothing whatever to do with the Plato who wrote dialectics and was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries. How many people would agree with this theory is problematical, but Relativity was not "invented," or even discovered by any one person—and the development of thought which produced it, has also produced a paradox of current feeling. This paradoxical view of the past sees it at once very much alive, by virtue of our minute knowledge, and feels it quite dead, at least in so far as its usefulness is concerned. We are determinedly unsentimental about the past. In our lucid moments we are conscious of the fact that our only advance has been in the path of material comfort and complexity, and our artists, conscious that their time is short, seek in the surface world about them a dubious shift for their spiritual nakedness.

It is not necessary to reiterate one of the major themes of this book—that if the poet expresses the deepest truths he finds in himself, he will in so doing express as much of his age as the conception can honestly bear. The search for novelty, which arises from our minute knowledge that there is nothing new under the sun (another gift of the historical habit of thought, and one which is true enough historically but definitely untrue, poetically) and the fear of being outmoded, has led to a tiresome superficiality in poetry; and some poets trade in their last year's convictions for shinier and improved models, a state of affairs which should be true only of the experimental years of adolescence. Scientific methods have infected our minds with the Eighteenth Century vice of poetical "invention," whereas the poet's real task is that of discovery. Because objective reality is gone and everything is relative, we forget that subjective reality, which is that of poetry, is as native to us as our own heartbeats.

We are a neurotic race, and very conscious of the fact. We are conscious, too, that many excellent poets have suffered from this disease and that the stuff of all introspective poetry is forged in the kind of heightened sensibility which is the flame of a neurosis, and from a *non sequitur* fallacy, based on this knowledge, our art grows proudly formless. And from our easy acceptance of history as prophecy, of science as religion, we find ourselves either with nothing to say, or desperately afraid to say anything with unequivocal seriousness. In so far as these tendencies affect our poetry, it is valueless save as a comment. To borrow a figure from Mr. Eliot, "the blossoms of . . . imagination draw no sustenance from the soil, but are cut and slightly withered flowers stuck in the sand."¹

It is the purpose of the following pages to amplify these accusations.

3

One by one, like leaves from a tree,
All my faiths have forsaken me;
But the stars above my head
Burn in white and delicate red,
And beneath my feet the earth
Brings the sturdy grass to birth.
I who was content to be
But a silken-singing tree,
But a rustle of delight
In the wistful heart of night,
I have lost the leaves that knew
Touch of rain and weight of dew.
Blinded by a leafy crown
I looked neither up nor down
But the leaves that fall and die
Have left me room to see the sky;
Now for the first time I know
Stars above and earth below.

—SARA TEASDALE.

¹ *The Sacred Wood*, 106. Mr. Eliot uses the figure in connection with Beaumont and Fletcher.

Like leaves from a tree, all the old faiths have forsaken the modern world, and our poetry naturally reflects that loss. In the verses quoted above (by no means equal to Miss Teasdale's best) we find a typical affirmation in the face of disillusionment. Whatever prose statement of belief Miss Teasdale might feel justified in making, her verse shows that her life has meaning. She is one of the moderns who, in their respective fashions, have made an adjustment between the world they inhabit and the world which inhabits them; an adjustment which gives them a positive attitude, so that they may deal in affirmations.

Some such adjustment is necessary to every poet, if his work is to have roots. The poet is constantly affirming, although his method is of course the opposite of direct statement. I do not by any means imply that wherever there is an adjustment which allows of affirmation, there is, *ipso facto*, poetry. Many of the living versifiers who are in the traditional current, are merely versifiers; and one could scarcely hesitate in choosing between the old phrases reiterating old truths without realising them freshly and thus enriching them, and the equally bad poetry which at least struggles with ideas.

If you were not away,
 These trees, this south-wind and this dreary day
 Would all be mad with joyous ecstasy;
 But you are gone, so mourning they with me
 Find bitter-sweet in idle fantasy.
 How glad, how mad, how gay,
 If you were not away!

—ROBERT S. JONES, JR.

These are date-less verses, but the following is very much a verse from our age of doubt:

Then Finitude is true Godhead's final test,
 Nor does it shear the grandeur from Free Being;
 "I must fulfill myself by self-destruction,"
 The curious phrase renews his conquering zest.

—ROBERT GRAVES.

Neither of these passages has the remotest claim to being poetry, but the first is "lyric lemonade," almost easier to write than not, and saying nothing; one thinks of "From you have I been absent in the spring, when proud-pied April," etc. The second, however, is at least the utterance of a mind in action, a soul in search of truth, and as such it must be respected. On the other hand, we are rather too much inclined to carry our respect for didactic and disillusioned verses—both of which, though especially the latter, are typical of the day—to the point of thinking them poetry; of accepting them as something new and modern, and therefore rather fine. The point is always, of course, not whether the manner and thought is new or old, but whether the complete conception is poetry.

We have heard it said so often that our age is one of disillusionment, that we are inclined almost to doubt it. But every age has probably been disillusioned of something, just as every age has had its own shibboleths and transient beliefs, and never have the poets been men of an easy optimism. With few exceptions, the poets of the world have at the same time been devoted lovers of life, and exiles in the world, their eyes never far from the threat and the release of death. For the same reason that a poet is always a lover he is usually a good hater, for love of one thing implies hatred of its opposite. Now hatred, in so far as it is directed toward everything inimical to the poet's conception of good, and not toward particular objects and people—is the reverse side of poetry. It is seldom the theme, the objective of a poem; it is rather a part of the passion underlying the actual conception. When Wordsworth wrote:

The sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gather'd now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn, . . .

he was really making affirmations as to the things in life we may cherish and love. We do not treasure this sonnet because it is an accusation against our dull spirits, our harassed way of living; but because the accusation is lifted into significance by Wordsworth's intense love of the sea, the moon, and the wind—which as symbols of his religion were as deeply rooted in his mind as were Proteus and Triton, similar symbols, in the minds of an alien race. The poetry of direct hatred, however, concerns itself negatively with despised institutions and persons. It deals with the manifestations of what seems to the poet evil, and its language is that of satire.

Although satire is not, properly speaking, poetry, its best medium is verse, rigid and rhymed verse, which lends memorable, epigrammatic qualities not to be attained in prose or in the wider rhythms of poetry. The poetic imagination is not easily pared down to an epigram, nor comfortably housed in its strictures. One reason for this is that a direct statement is prose; and poetry differs from prose in that it always says more than it seems to say. The epigram, on the other hand, because it is startling, because it says something in a new way, usually seems to say more than it actually does. That is, it is so illuminating that it has the appearance of a final word, and when it is sharply set off by metre and rhyme it seems even more definitively final. Many people will remember having heard a conversation cut short by an epigram, not because there is less to say when the shot has been fired, but because the momentary shock to the mind, the surprise of a rounded finality of thought, usually has the effect of laying the subject by. In some respects, the epigram is the corpse of thought, poetry the conceptive germ. The epigram, by virtue of its concentration, borrows the air of inevitability and finality which we associate with poetry, but an examination of it will almost always reveal it to be a direct statement, the stuff of prose.

It is very difficult to illustrate this point, because poetry

has a logic of its own. Any words which can be reduced or expanded into another form—in this case, into prose—without, as Coleridge said, “diminution of significance, either in sense or association, or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their diction”—in other words, not poetry in our sense of the word. But allowing for this, I select at random an epigrammatic stanza and two stanzas of poetry, both dealing with the same idea, which might be stated thus, in prose: Man is cruel to nature; but man is himself nature and in the end yields back what he has taken.

Why in the world of things, O nature-lover,
Should the butcher make you weep?
The sheep is food to man, and man to clover
And clover to the sheep.
—WITTER BYNNER.

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The rose as where some buried Cæsar bled;
That every hyacinth the garden wears
Dropt in her lap from some once lovely head.

And this reviving herb whose tender green
Fledges the river-lip on which we lean—
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely lip it springs unseen!

The methods of the two verse statements are obviously opposed. The epigram makes no attempt at poetry, the poem makes no attempt at a statement. But the essential difference lies in the fact that the former *seems* to contain a whole truth, whereas the latter merely seems to us true. In other words, the epigram challenges us to think behind it, to question it—for unquestioned it puts one under the necessity of identifying human death with butchery, and one naturally thinks of these two things in different terms. Human death has a dignity, despite its ugly facts, and butchery has no possible dignity, but is at best an ugly necessity. One

accepts the epigram with pleasure in its salty reproof to sentimentalists, but at the same time one remembers that there is no biological reason (I keep to the word of science) why both men and sheep should not be food for clover, and clover (or its equivalent) food for men and sheep—which discounts entirely the effectiveness of the epigram in so far as it is about butchers. The verses from *The Rubáiyát* are not to be encompassed with, or controverted by, logic. They arouse sets of feelings which while they are factually as true to mortality as the epigram, nevertheless force us to accept them on their own terms. They stimulate the imagination, rather than the reason, to work upon them.

The epigram, then, is the proper tool of satire, not of poetry; and satire is a form closely allied to poetry, but bent on different ends. It is negative, rather than positive. It springs directly from a hatred of sham, where poetry has roots in a love of truth. The aim of satire is to separate an apparent whole by exposing its incongruities; that of poetry is exactly the opposite. The truth of poetry can never be entirely caught in words, but the statements of satire can adequately trap secondary truths. Above all other differentiations, satire's strongest lance is ridicule, and that of poetry is reverence.

I have laboured this point because one naturally looks to find satire in the modern world, and it is only by realising that poetry and satire are complements—reverse sides of the same passion—that one begins to understand how stultifying to both is the popular tone of our thought. The motive force of both is passion, and the basis of passion in both cases is a belief which is essentially moral; a belief that something or other is better than something else; better and more important. One thinks immediately, in this connection, of Aristophanes, who when he wished could be purely the poet; but few men have an equal intensity in both the affirmation and the negation of their beliefs. The satirist, indeed, may have

contemplated cruelty and folly until he thinks he believes in nothing else, and the result may be a complete cynicism, such as one finds in Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. But a complete cynicism, implying neither good nor bad but ultimate unimportance in everything it contemplates, is barren; and the very tone of satire states by implication that there is something better than the vanity or the folly it ridicules.

Edwin Muir, in *Transition*,¹ writes thus of the mediocre writers of every age:

Writers of this sort . . . speak out of the *Zeit Geist* as if they were speaking in their sleep. All the thoughts, attitudes, phrases, techniques of the *Zeit Geist* crowd into their minds and emerge again with an individual twist, it is true, for personality can never be completely abnegated, but without a single fundamental question having been addressed to them. Works produced in this way are immediately understood by all those who are in the stream of the same *Zeit Geist*. . . . This comprehension is complete and immediate because writers of this order never question the premises of the age, and because to question premises is always an unfamiliar and unwelcome process. The mark of these writers is that they accept the spirit of the age both consciously and unconsciously; their conscious is accordingly *a mere passive reflection of a general unconscious, and is incapable of being turned back into that unconscious, to discover and objectify what is there. They are mere expressions of the things of which as artists they should be the contemplators*. If they have enthusiasm it is not their enthusiasm, if disillusion, not their disillusion, if thought, not their thoughts. These are manifestations of a literary fashion, and it is the essential nature of fashion to blind us to its meanings and the causes from which it springs; to everything, in fact, except the inevitability of the conformity it demands. . . .

To the intelligentsia a hundred years ago the spirit of the age was not represented by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, but rather by Campbell, Moore, and the *Edinburgh Review*. It is true, the intelligentsia have no power over us as soon as the age which produced them has passed, but while they are contemporary they are the chief moulders of opinion, and have incalculable power, the infinite power of suggestion. In the modern world, the power most solidly obnoxious to the artist is not the public but the intelligentsia.

¹ (New York, 1926), 6 ff.

Despite the fact that Mr. Muir might possibly disagree with me as to which of our poets belong to the class he describes here, I have used his words because they seem to me vitally true; and although no one would venture to say exactly what our own *Zeitgeist* purposes, it is obvious enough to any one that disillusionment is the order of the day—disillusionment which is not compatible with the gusty hatred of satire, and we are poorer therefore in more than in poetry. The Twentieth Century inspires disapproval in most of its intelligentsia, and the thoughtful and sensitive people complain endlessly of the scientific and industrial confusion which has destroyed stability and values, but many of the complaints are made in a spirit of self-pitying futility which argues in the speaker a corresponding lack of stability and values. The degrees of variation in this disorganisation of personality are of course endless, but in some way or other most of the poets who should have seen their way through the surrounding Bedlam to some haven of individual truth, are instead defeated and embittered, and under the necessity of submitting to the intellectual fallacies of the age.

The submissions are, as I said, endlessly different, but there are two distinct types of defeat which abound. There are the Miniver Cheevys, who accept on faith the fact that life could, under the proper circumstances, be a rich and happy affair. These, in so far as they aspire to be poets, accept the world about them. They affirm a personal truth only in complaints which imply that in another atmosphere that truth might be true objectively. In other words, they talk endlessly of the poems they might have written had they been the contemporaries of Dante, or Shakespeare, or Keats. Either through sentimentality or ignorance they ignore the fact that these men all wrested significance from the confusion and complexity of the worlds they lived in; that a road, three houses, and twelve people are enough to bring confusion to any one. The making of poetry demands, ultimately,

two factors—a spiritual apprehension of the subject, and the inescapable necessity of finding words for that spiritual apprehension; and given these two qualities together, the confusion and artificiality which bulk so large in modern life are as little capable of deflecting the poet from creation, as the road, the three houses, the twelve people, and the simplicity these things connote, are incapable of inspiring poetry in a person who has not those two qualities. I am discounting entirely those important but secondary factors of modern life, such as the deadening effects of city life, the pressure of commercialism, and the fact that the dominant influence of the scientific point of view appears to reduce poetry to absurdity. I discount these facts because any one who submits to them is taking the worn path of least resistance, and shaping his life to material ends. In other words, a spiritual poverty accounts for any one's acceptance of what he feels to be an unworthy or wasteful life. The fact that modern civilisation fosters this spiritual poverty in a prodigious fashion does not controvert the more important fact that there is no reason why with effort any one may not overcome the apparent imposition.

The whining acceptance of the second-rate argues, in fact, a lack of lucid thought as well as lack of desire for the first-rate, but there is another type of defeat common to our artists, which is more thoroughgoing and deadly in its effects, since it seems to influence men of the keenest intellectual power. This is the complete defeat of spirit, among people who have an endowment fitting them naturally for a constructive attitude. With exceptional powers, great poetic sensibility, and a natural activity of the spirit, these leaders of the Disillusioned are really what they profess to be. They are not disillusioned without having taken thought as to the reason why: they are always taking thought, and their thought is such that it poisons the wellsprings of poetry. They are discontented with the world as it is, but they accept

it in the apparent belief that they are so inalienably slaves of that world, that neither without nor within can they escape its mastery. They hate the vulgarity and confusion of that world, they see clearly the irony of man's spirit trapped in the jaws of complete scepticism; but they mistrust their hatred, they mistrust their clear sight, above all they mistrust their instinctive feeling that there is anything to be gained by opposing themselves to modern life as it is being shaped by the majority. In other words, they are desperately afraid of believing in anything. If this is unfair, let us say that they are incapable of believing in anything, except in the fact that there is nothing in which they can believe.

This attitude is a slow, widening stain on modern life. Hardy's belief in a moronic and blundering Omnipotence is, in contrast with it, a sign of optimism, for at the very least such stoicism is a final refuge and a first cause. If it is spiritually barren, it at least leaves man his accidental illusions of dignity and moral purpose. Hardy's "It" may not have known what It was about when It endowed humanity with hope and desire and the capacity to suffer—with all the qualities which make him feel that his life has a meaning—but It at least has given him, blunderingly, these qualities, and that is much to admit. The Disillusioned, however, are not even flattered by disillusioned creeds. They believe nothing, and so their poetry, even should it be in decasyllabic couplets, is substantially formless. It means nothing, and whereas art depends always upon a strict selection, they have no point of view from which to exercise this selection, with the result that their words fall bewilderingly, each after each. It is impertinent to feel that the Disillusioned need a reminder that life is not art. They are, for the most part, self-conscious and meticulous artists. They appear to know exactly what they are trying to do, and they hold ready behind every word a paragraph or two of critical theory. But perhaps they forget that the real difference between life as it surges about us

and art as it apprehends a significance from that life, is precisely the difference between not-meaning and meaning; and thus they fail as poets in so far as they can not acknowledge any possible meaning in life.

The disparate patches of knowledge and scepticism, impressed by the age upon the minds of the Disillusioned, living there with strange bedfellows and spawning strange offspring, are impossible to escape in the mass thought, difficult to track down in the work of any individual. The least libellous thing one can do is to analyse them and look for their embodiment in verse, without attempting an exact statement as to which mischief underlies the general futility in any particular instance.

4

A poor degenerate from the ape,
Whose hands are four, whose tail's a limb,
I contemplate my flaccid shape
And know I may not rival him,

Save with my mind—a nimbler beast
Possessing a thousand sinewy tails,
A thousand hands, with which it scales,
Greedy of luscious truth, the greased

Poles and the coco palms of thought,
Thrifs easily through the mangrove maze
Of metaphysics, walks the taut
Frail dangerous liana ways

That link across wide gulfs remote
Analogies between tree and tree;
Outruns the hare, outhops the goat;
Mind fabulous, mind sublime and free!

But oh, the sound of simian mirth!
Mind, issued from the monkey's womb,
Is still umbilical to earth,
Earth its home and earth its tomb.

—ALDOUS HUXLEY

These verses, in addition to being very amusing, are in all details except underlying spirit the stuff of which satire is made. Mr. Huxley however can not write satire, although he is always hovering on the verge of it,

. . . But when the wearied Band
Swoons to a waltz, I take her hand,
And there we sit in blissful calm,
Quietly sweating palm to palm,

just as he is always hovering on the verge of poetry, and never, for the same reason, quite attaining to it:

Let us abandon ourselves to Time, which is beauty's essence. We live among the perpetual degeneration of apotheoses. . . . Beauty, then, is that moment of descent when apotheosis tilts its wings downwards into the gulf. The ends of the curve lose themselves parabolically somewhere in infinity. Our sentimental eyes see only the middle section of this degeneration, knowing neither the upper nor the lower extremes, which some have thought to meet, godhead and annihilation.

Old Curiosity Shops! If I have said, "Mortality is beauty," it was a weakness. The sense of time is a symptom of anæmia of the soul, through which flows angelic ichor. . . .

Not to perceive where all is ugly, eaten into by the syphilis of time, heart-sickening—this is beauty; not to desire where death is the only consummation—wisdom. . . .

O supreme beauty of a night that knows no limitations—stars at the jagged edges of cock-crowing. Desperate, my mind has desired it: never my blood, whose pulse is a rhythm of the world.

At the other extreme, Beatrice lacks solidity, is as unresponsive to your kisses as mathematics. She too is an oubliette, not a way of life; an oubliette that, admittedly, shoots you upwards into light, not down to death; but it comes to the same thing in the end.

What, then, is the common measure? To take the world as it is, but metaphorically, informing the chaos of nature with a soul, qualifying transience with eternity.

I have maimed this prose-poem by incomplete quotation, but I have given enough of it to show that, as a poem, it is at best a record of thought. The point of view shifts from

one extreme to the other as Mr. Huxley pursues his ideas. The words I have italicised are such an excellent description of the poetic process that it is only by realising their context that we are able to understand why Mr. Huxley can not himself practise it. The poet takes the world as it is, metaphorically, but he does so from an inner necessity and not as a conscious prescription, a trick to escape looking at facts. The facts are, always and forever, that nature seems to be a chaos, that transience is the law for everything that we can see. The spiritual facts however, for the poet, are that chaos and transience are not the laws of his deepest being, and thus he is not escaping reality by seeking it when he finds words for his metaphorical acceptance of the world as it is. Mr. Huxley, on the other hand, is, poetically, of the generation which sees all things face to face and gives no quarter to Illusion, feeling that any affirmation in a world of flux is an act of sentimentality. Underlying all the intellectual attitudes, there is one basic affirmation which accounts for the fact that none of the three quotations above is poetry. This affirmation is thoroughgoing, wholesale, and as arbitrary as any poet's affirmation of the spirit: it is an assertion of the scientific point of view, a materialistic basis for life, and it levels humanity to a flat, meaningless scale. The mind *seems* to be a spirit with strong wings and a world of its own, but it is really umbilical to earth. Beauty is time, and at the next moment, Beauty is neglect of time. Stoicism is wisdom. Shooting upward into light and down into death are the same thing in the end. One of the calm blisses of man is holding a sweaty hand. In short, man is an animal, and try as he may, Mr. Huxley cannot feel himself justified in letting his readers forget it. He is quite right in never forgetting it himself if he believes it; one admires to-day any consistent and courageous attitude toward life. But Mr. Huxley's intuitive attitude is that of a poet, and thus he is not at home in his consistency, and can be neither one thing

nor the other—neither poet nor satirist. When his intuitions appear to controvert the premises of biology, they are immediately discredited as some odd accident of arrangement in the brain cells.

Mr. Huxley shares with Robert Graves another habit inimical to poetry—that of presenting the reader with bare thought processes, rather than with that complete poetical experience in which the intellectual processes have already affected the idea in the dark of conception. The prose argument on beauty is only a prose argument, despite the incidental poetry. Mr. Graves sins more often in this respect than Mr. Huxley, but, I believe, for a different reason. The excerpt beginning,

Then Finitude is true Godhead's final test,

I have already quoted. Better far the bare thought processes of an interesting mind than the soothing syrup of a second-rate lyricist, but the fact that so keen an intelligence as Mr. Graves could back up his prose utterances with a complete theory which declares them poetry, argues a loss of standards which has left him bereft of convictions. One suspects, in fact, that Mr. Graves is bitten fatally, in the vitals, with the current doctrine of relativity. This ingenious and plausible theory is attractive in many respects; it is even poetically attractive at first thought, but it leads one very subtly to materialism, and in the physical world poetry is bound and blindfold. Mr. Huxley is emotionally a slave to biology. Mr. Graves is intellectually a slave to the scientific habit of thought, and they both fall into prose statement, they both assume the adequacy of unresolved thought for poetry, because for these different reasons they have no faith in anything except mind, and ultimately no faith in that. If the mind, that is, is umbilical to earth, or if it is umbilical to a predetermining concept of Time, it can arrive at no

possible enlightenment. And if there is nothing to assume except mind, and if mind can never arrive, the best one can do is to show it in the process of moving. The direction does not matter, and the goal is always relative.

5

It is just here, in connection with the processes of mind, that one feels in all modern art the greatest confusion of ideas. This confusion is due to a fallacious appropriation, by artists, of the findings of psychology.¹

There is good reason for the wide-thrown effect of the new psychology, and for the promise we see of a tremendous growth and dissemination of its discoveries in the future, for the most respected figure in our civilisation is the man of science, and psychology is regarded as a science. The result of this wide respect for the man of science is that the tone of the humanities is changing. Science is cold, analytical, and depersonalised. Its objectivity had little effect on the artist when science was dealing with the objective world. Even when man came into his simian birthright, the artist had still his unquestioned belief in the superiority of his mind; and mind had still its marvellous mystery, its "mangrove maze of metaphysics," its "coco palms of thought." The idea that that mind was umbilical to earth meant little to most poets, who have always felt most keenly their kinship with nature and found in this kinship one of their deepest pleasures and challenges. Swinburne's "Hertha" is a perfect illustration of the glorification of man's earthly affinities. It recognises, boasts, that earth is man's home and his tomb, but it assumes in the "spirit" of matter all those qualities of spirit in man which were to Swinburne unquestioned:

¹ I do not call the new psychology a science, although it seeks so far as possible to apply scientific method to its material. However, though it is not a science, it is vaguely regarded as such by a large section of the public, and its conclusions are popularised and misapplied with the same zeal which is lavished on the conclusions of science.

I am in thee to save thee,
As my soul in thee saith,
Give thou as I gave thee,
Thy life-blood and breath,
Green leaves of thy labour, white flowers of thy thought and
red fruit of thy death.

O children of banishment,
Souls overcast,
Were the lights ye see vanish meant
Always to last
Ye would know not the sun overshining the shadows
and stars overpast.

Psychology, however, and especially abnormal psychology, has directly affected not only the methods of the poets and novelists, not only the subject matter of all the arts, but the foundations of esthetic belief. Regarded as the final word on humanity, psychoanalytical findings may be either encouraging or discouraging, depending, I believe, upon how much one really knows; it is the dabblers who grow cynical. Certainly these findings impose no necessity, within the strictest logic, of materialism, being indeed the most immediately practical, and the least subversive to human values, of all scientific inferences. They deal with the human mind, which is always a cosmos and contains in germ every larger question one can fling at the limits of the universe. Psychology and anthropology have destroyed many of our illusions about ourselves. They have uncovered the possible ugliness of our prettiest gestures, the savagery latent in the most sacred institutions of society; but intelligently accepted, these discoveries are salutary and constructive, as well as interesting.

The poets and novelists among the intelligentsia have either embraced wholeheartedly the new psychology, or they have despite themselves been profoundly influenced by it. In either case they are finding new ideas and new methods, and

the price one pays for the occasional appearance of a genuine discovery, in which a new method is in harmony with tradition and common sense (I am thinking especially of Virginia Woolf's novels) is a price incident to all discovery. For every one intelligent apprehension of our latest factual knowledge, there is a heavy shower of New Art; and one is hardly inclined to question the first word of the title, as most of the material is crude and raw. The words and ideas are regurgitated stuff, cast back into the world before the digestive process has even begun to mill them about. Naturally there is no form in the New Art, although form is one of its important preoccupations, for the form of ideas is always integral with their conception, and grows with them in an inseparable and slow harmony.

The most important effect, however, of the conjunction in the poet of respect for the man of science and the fact that he breathes the new psychology in the air around him, is not directly on his work, but on those nearest convictions which his work reflects. New ideas and new methods are secondary aspects of art, and, there being a "lunatic fringe" to any movement, are subject to no more abuses than are any other incipient blessings. But the purpose, the attitude, the expectations of the poet—are of inestimable importance. The poet must believe in his work, he must believe himself capable of more than a fragmentary lucidity, or poetry becomes at once so trivial as to be non-existent.

It will be apparent to any reader of this book exactly why I say that the poet must first of all believe in himself—must believe in the genuineness of his deepest emotions, in the integrity of his deepest thoughts. The new psychology traces the complexity of men's emotions to their simplest manifestations, and the effect of this apparent simplicity combined with the fact that science rightly and necessarily ignores human emotions, has produced in the intelligentsia a mis-

trust of self which has merged into a wider fear—the overwhelming fear of sentimentality.

Sentimentality is currently defined in innumerable ways, usually to describe any emotional attitude of which one disapproves. As a bug-bear to our intelligentsia, it has become something more obnoxious than the customary “indulgence in emotion for its own sake”; it is now a term applied to the serious expression of any emotion. Science sets up the standard of *pure thought*; science eliminates emotion, so far as is possible, for the achievement of pure thought; psychology undermines the validity of the emotions. Ergo, emotions, impulses, sensibility, are all impure at their source; intuition is bogus, and pure thought is the ideal.

We have already examined the question of pure thought as an excellent ideal for the disparate purposes of science and philosophy. Leaving aside, then, this question, and also the misapprehension that psychology has undermined the validity of the emotions,¹ one can see that this confusion of thought would naturally have led to a horror of sentimentality, and also to a new sort of sentimentality. That is, if sentimentality is a form of intellectual dishonesty—the shaping of thought at the dictates of emotion—it is inimical to art, and rightly to be feared. But the artistic process does not conform to factual truths. It proceeds in terms of the individual ego, and the compromise that ego has made with objective reality. The individual, however, is compact of emotion and of sensibility, and in each case the emotional factors are slight distortions of an universally apprehensible emotion. The disciple of psychology should know that our emotions have, by laborious transformation and unconscious

¹ The poet of all people should be ashamed of this inference, since his preoccupation is always with the intricacy of contrast in thought, the interplay of feeling, and the tracking down of the vast synthesis of a mood to a nuclear point which is small enough to be apprehensible. Psychology traces the threads to a few primary sources; the sources become more mysterious and powerful as they shrink to the gigantic minuteness of a first cause.

alchemy, made us what we are. It is emotion that makes us think, and it is emotion that emphasises for each of us the things worth thinking about. Our response to the objective world is emotional in so far as it is purely our own, and our knowledge of others is always in some respects an imaginative creation. Pure thought, then, is a myth; an Absolute which, once attained, would automatically destroy the roots of art by lighting all the dark places of the universe. Pure thought would be God, a flame on the mountain-top, with something on His lips more mysterious and more important than the Ten Commandments.

Now no one with an atom of common sense denies the active existence of emotion. The Disillusioned, however, fearing that their thought may become contaminated by feeling, deny tacitly the ultimate validity of emotion. The artists among them, who are constrained to deal with the emotions, elude the issue in various ways, most commonly by making a joke of them. And so we have the new sentimentality. It is *au fond* the fear of being laughed at, which leads one to laugh first; the fear of taking seriously that whole realm of being which science necessarily ignores; the realisation that emotion is easy, and thought difficult, and the consequent failure to see that the most difficult feat of all is an honest adjustment of the two in the light of all one's knowledge and all invincible feeling. The new sentimentality aspires to the supposed disillusionment of the man of science, and sees any admission of purpose in man's life, of significance in his instincts, as a loophole for optimism.

So there is a continued conflict between the apparent importance to the individual, and the scientific unimportance, of human emotion—which conflict is ideally impossible to solve, and only at home in irony. In modern practice, however, it is usually evaded by the poet's hiding himself behind triviality. He makes a joke of the whole thing, and the evasion is no less complete for the fact that the jokes are supposed

to be bitter. No one can track him down to a belief. Realistically or poetically, he will set the emotion down; then he will reduce it to absurdity, so that the reader will never be able to know whether or not he means anything he has said. This results, at worst, in nothing more than a new way of writing badly for people who have nothing whatever to say, and who are therefore not worth troubling about. At best, it results in fragmentary art—in conceptions which are never closely knit and whole, informed by a consistent point of view, or an honest intention. It also results in a precarious position for the critic, who, if he tries to find a serious meaning in the poet's work, incurs the accusation that he has no sense of humour.

6

One of the most interesting aspects of psychology and anthropology is the light they have thrown on the creative processes of the individual and the communal minds, and one of the most deplorable false simplifications in modern creative writing is the authors' misuse of these findings. Psychoanalysis has analysed in some detail the unconscious factors at work in the transmuting crucible of creation. It has occasionally been able to postulate a credible meaning for a work of art, a poem, in terms of the artist's dominant desires. Anthropology has done the reverse of this, and shown the human impulses and fears underlying various social structures. Together these findings are highly exciting, but if they prove anything in a general sense, it is the undeniable fact that the activities of any people and the creative work of any individual, spring from a hidden source—from a necessity for approximating in ideal form the a-social instincts and those emotional needs which are *absolutely not realizable in any but a sublimated form*. In other words, the truth of any work of art—that which the artist *must express* and which irradiates and shapes the finished symbol so that it

"contains its own evidence"—belongs to the unconscious mind;¹ not, be it noticed, to the subconscious mind, in which lurk many fantastic images and phrases and memories accessible to the probing conscious mind—but in the true unconscious which is very honestly what its name implies.

By an easy confusion of thought, the poet has forgotten or never realised that this knowledge is of no use to him when he is in the act of creation. Rather he has seen it as a simplification of his problems, and taking for granted that the few primal emotions are proper for the germinal essence or the heart of a poem, he proceeds to build up his work in the exact progression in which the analyst has torn to pieces similar work. In short, he makes method of material and material of method, and denies, in so doing, one precious and essential truth; he tries to effect consciously that which derives its whole integrity from the fact that it is unconscious.

For the integrity of a poem is, roughly speaking and in the light of psychology, just this: At base it deals with the kind of emotion which is close to the roots of philosophy and is therefore a-social. Such basic feelings are common to the deepest needs of that lonely creature who must live in the press of his kind, Man. This is another way of saying that a poem has universal application. On a slightly more complex level, this universal emotion is concentrated in symbolic terms; it is, therefore, a compromise, and since every man who is not mad or dead must effect an analogous compromise, it enriches the emotional life of the reader by widening the channels for one of his most rampant energies. On a still more complex plane, the compromise, the symbol, gathers, like a magnet among needles, the associations with which a vast number of similar compromises have filled his conscious and unconscious mind, so that every image and word is

¹ ". . . mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, *each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.*—SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*.

rich and inexhaustible in meaning. And last, at the highest possible point of the progression, is the conscious artist, the complex individual, the poet, who is a rational being, aware of what in the emergent material is conformable to objective reality, and what is inharmonious, superfluous; and in so far as his ability permits, he reconciles matter and form, material and method; his own reality and the reality he shares with others.

Now the true value of poetic association in the mind is its unique character. A good poem could not by an imaginable miracle have been written by any one except the person who actually wrote it, and yet a reading of it will establish in the reader's own mind (if it is rich enough in associative material) the chain of feeling and thought by which it originally emerged from the poet's mind. Figuratively, the emotion in the poet diverges from one nuclear point through a widening sphere, and in the reader it retraces its steps through width to concentration. The nuclear point is similar in essence—hence the commonly experienced feeling that the poet has overheard one's most secret communings. The associative area accounts for what we call "poetic surprise"—the delighted shock of experiencing what is in truth a creative process, when we bring to the associations aroused by the poet new and ramified associations of our own.

Now the misappropriation by the poets of this knowledge results in a complete destruction of the nuclear emotion of familiarity. If the nuclear point is absent—that is, if the poet has nothing to say; and how can he have, when the emotions are tripped up before they emerge, in order that they may stand on their heads before Pure Thought?—if he has nothing to say, there will be no focal point in his creation, no enlightenment for the self of the reader. However complex is the raw material of a poem, however carefully the poet lets his mind wander over and around his incidental ideas, seizing each association as it becomes verbal and setting it down chronologically, the result will be thin, mean-

ingless, and indigenous to the fallacious soil of realism. Realism is the use of secondary material instead of the primary—unimagined, uninformed with a personal meaning, and its fascination for many people, I believe, lies in the fact that it allows the reader to do all the creative work for himself. In some sense, no intelligent person can read a book without creating another one in the process, but there is a finality about creative writing which imposes upon the person who is experiencing it quite rigid limitations of sub-creation.

Psychologically, all neurosis is imbedded in the unconscious mind, and poetically speaking, all poetry is rooted in the unconscious. Therefore it is quite true that there is a subtly differentiated analogy between the raw stuff of a neurosis and the material of a poem. But art achieved, a poem finished, is very different from neurosis, and this fact cannot be too heavily stressed. A neurosis and a poem may have exactly the same roots in the individual's mind; and if the individual, the poet, is simply a neurotic, the poem will be unreal in the same way that a neurotic disease is always unreal to every one except the sufferer. If the poet is a poet, the poem will have escaped the confines of pathology, and its only unresolved element will be the emotional compulsion behind it—that quality we call passion or intensity. Now the "modern" poetry, which tries to achieve unconscious germination by taking conscious thought, reverses the whole artistic process. Instead of the imagination welding together fantasy and thought, we find thought setting out with a gun and camera to bring in the dead corpses and speaking likenesses of fantasy. And therefore we find manufactured idols made in the image of a scientific rationalisation, and consequent upon this is all the poverty of thought, all the thin unreality of "realism," all the bogus "significance" of insignificant ideas, which invariably attends any poetry based on theory rather than on an inner compulsion.

The poetic surprise, mentioned above, is one of the ob-

jectives of the neurosis-realists. It is a part of the realistic method that it never interprets detail in terms of the author, but seeks to rest all significance on the thing-in-itself, to depersonalise the writer. From a materialist or from one who denies validity to the intuitions, any interpretation is of course illogical and dishonest, but it has always been the business and the joy of the poet to treat the whole universe in the interpretive fashion. The realist, however, makes a fetish of detail; he juxtaposes irreconcilable details in discrete proportions when he wishes to convey a sense of irony. He strains out a few incidental and eccentric associations, and expects the reader to draw his own conclusions, although there is no conclusion to be drawn because no deeper meaning forced the associations in the first place. In other words, he makes an end of what in poetry is simply one of the means toward a very different end.

For this reason, we see a new idol in modern poetry, The Phrase. Any reader alive to differences will know what I mean by this. It is an interesting development, and significant of the superficiality of purpose in modern poetry. The Phrase is a little surprise; as used in much modern verse it tempts the reader to forget that nothing is being said, because as he proceeds so many charming *little* things are said, so many pleasant *little* pictures flash before his eyes. In order to create surprise with the phrase, however, the poets exercise their reason rather than their imagination, and the result is that much of their work surprises one to laughter.

At the risk of being told that it was intended to be funny, I will quote from a poet who sometimes achieves most beautiful phrases by virtue of having something important to say:

"Under this water-lily knee" (she said)
"Blood intricately flows, corpuscle creeps,
The white like sliced cucumber, and the red
Like poker-chip,"¹

¹ Conrad Aiken.

etc., through an incredibly bad passage. This is an excellent example of the futility of attempting to avoid conventional associations by manufacturing new ones. The following much-quoted verses, however, although the associations are not patently artificial, and may very well be authentic, will illustrate what I mean by saying that an undue reverence for The Phrase leads to an acceptance as poetry of what is really clever and charming but absolutely unimportant writing:

Lovely Semiramis
Closes her slanting eyes:
Dead is she long ago.
From her fan, sliding slow,
Parrot-bright fire's feathers,
Gilded as June weathers,
Plumes bright and shrill as grass
Twinkle down; as they pass
Through the green glooms in Hell
Fruits with a tuneful smell,
Grapes like an emerald rain,
Where the full moon has lain,
Greengages bright as grass,
Melons as cold as glass,
Piled on each gilded booth,
Feel their cheeks growing smooth.
Apes in plumed head-dresses
Whence the bright heat hisses,—
Nubian faces, sly
Pursing mouth, slanting eye,
Feel the Arabian
Winds floating from the fan.¹

I am not trying to discount the value of the phrase for first-rate poetry. It is one of the integral factors of poetry, and in the reaction away from empty generalisations and direct statements, the modern poets have done great service in training the public to an appreciation of the minute lovelinesses of poetic utterance. But the phrase-in-itself is prac-

¹ Edith Sitwell.

tically the only source of poetic surprise in the work of many very able writers, whereas the true poetical experience of surprise is manifold in one larger conception. Nothing less than an intense need to speak, to apprehend one concentrated and moving experience, will bring it to birth in its complex purity.

7

It is so frequently said that poetry should be "pure" that it is worth an effort to make this question perfectly clear. Several years ago Mr. George Moore issued an anthology of *Pure Poetry*, explaining in the Introduction that poetry should be "unsicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." The value of the anthology was to be its creation of a "new standard"—a standard of Art for Art's sake, which, as Mr. Moore applies it to poetry, means nothing more than poetry for the other Arts' sake.

My father [Mr. Moore writes on page 19 of this characteristic introduction] used to admire the sonnet on Westminster Bridge, and I admired it until I could no longer escape from the suspicion that it was not the beautiful image of a city overhanging a river at dawn that detained the poet, but the hope that he might once more discern a soul in nature. Having, I said to myself, discerned a soul in a primrose by a river's brim, it would seem to him parsimonious to limit the habitation of the soul to a woodland flower, and he would soon begin to seek it in bricks and mortar. But what would he do with the soul when he got it?

Mr. Moore is always at his most lucid when he is explaining his own superiority to all other artists, and so in this enlightening illustration he gives us the whole of his poetic beliefs. They are quite exactly the opposite of my own, and there is no necessity here for treating them in detail. On one point, however, they touch a current misconception—the idea that poetry should approximate to painting, or music, or both.

It is true that good poetry is musical, and one deplorable aspect of much modern verse is its obvious design on the eye rather than the ear. E. E. Cummings is an outstanding example of this. Some of his best poems are straightforward sonnets when they are read aloud, and can be conventionally arranged on the page. I have been told that Mr. Cummings's typographical oddities are only an attempt to direct the unpractised ears of his readers through their more skilful eyes, which makes one wonder whether the dull ears of the public are not dull because the poets have failed them. Good poetry forces us to read it properly. Part of the wholeness and beauty of a poem lies in the inevitable arrangement of words; an arrangement which, however arbitrary it may look on the page, determines, when it is spoken, the rhythm of the lines, the emphasis of the ideas, the light and shade of the incidental imagery. Except for free verse, of which we have so little that is memorable that it can hardly be used as an illustration, most of the bizarre efforts at form in modern verse are really directed toward the appearance of the words on the page, rather than toward the satisfaction of the ear. On the contrary, Herrick's poem beginning,

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon,

has, visually, a difficult and arbitrary form, but a large part of its magic lies in the impossibility of reading it wrong, or of following any emphasis indicated to the eye. One is led by the inner emphasis implicit in sense and sound combined.

But although poetry is musical, it is very far from music, as any music-lover would hasten to tell us. The poetry of virtuosity approaches it, but even such a prize exhibit as the first verses in Mr. Moore's *Anthology*—Skelton's lines to Mistress Pennell—which have not an idea under their jingle, does employ words as its medium:

My maiden Isabel,
Reflaring rosabel,
The fragrant camamel,
The ruddy rosary,
The sovereign rosemary,
The pretty strawberry,
The columbine, the nepte,
The ieloffer well set,
The proper violet, . . .

Any appeal this may have is due to the unresolved elements of childishness in us, to the infantile love of puns and plays on words so native to the unconscious mind. This constitutes the chief charm for children of jingling words and nonsense rhymes; the fact that the words are supposed to mean something, and that the more one mixes them up, deprives them of ordered sequence, the more humorous and secret to the individual is the significance of the nonsense. If, however, verses are not designedly nonsensical, but are simply harmonious and suggestive of pretty objects, as in the Skelton lines, they may be compared to music, but only intelligently with the strict understanding that the medium of music is almost as remote from that of poetry as are the lines and colours and forms of the plastic arts.

There is no real danger, however, that words will ever be used seriously except to convey ideas, and it would be refreshing if verse should cease torturing our ears. Therefore I am not so anxious to stress the fact that poetry and music are two entirely different arts, as I am to controvert Mr. Moore's not unique desire that poetry should take to painting; should turn to what he calls "the only permanent world, the world of things." Now great poetry has never left the world of things, although its way of approaching it is by trying to apprehend the *inwardness of objects*; discerning in them, as Mr. Moore facetiously observed, a soul; or, more literally, trying to discern their relationship to the soul. The

difference between descriptive verse and interpretive poetry is obvious. It is the *raison d'être* of poetry, as the difference between a photograph and a picture is the *raison d'être* of painting. But poetry can never interpret the world of things in terms of the plastic arts. Its nearest approximation is secured by emasculating words of their ideational significance; using so far as is possible only words which are *names for things*, and thus giving the mind a picture devoid of mood or meaning. Painting and music speak their own respective languages, and cannot be translated into the language of speech without losing their unique significance.

The contrary of this is equally true, and when a poet sets out to make pictures, he is mixing terms in a sterile effort. The Imagists, famous in 1916, were a school with some such intention; for although they denied that they were a "school of painters," their creed, in so far as they defined it, stressed as a fundamental principle what is simply a secondary quality of poetry. Their importance lies in the fact that their inspiration was apparently drawn from a general tendency.

The idea that an image or a series of images is a poem is simply half of a fairly good idea. It is close to the belief that a series of poetic phrases constitutes a poem; indeed, the image *is* the poem produced by such a series of phrases. Early in the century, our poetry lost for a time the "kindling epithet," as Mr. Neilson has called it; the habit of concentrated metaphors. The loss, however, was due to an absence of more fundamental qualities, and the weakness of Imagism and similar groups lay in this misplaced emphasis. As "schools" these groups have broken up or ceased to wave their banners, but they have influenced the public, so that any fragment of observation may now stand proudly alone as a complete poem:

The fog comes
on little cat feet,

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.¹

Mr. Sandburg at times has something to say which is worth listening to, but here he is only amusing himself with a little pen-and-ink sketch, and the fact that this is one of the most widely quoted of his verses is indicative of an indiscriminating public. The Imagists themselves probably intended no such result, although some of their own work was equally trivial. H. D., the only one of the group who has developed an unique poetry in harmony with the original Imagist credo, always gives in her best work more than a picture. True to her beliefs, she avoids "cosmic" abstractions to what I believe to be a deleterious degree, but her concrete and clean-cut images all heighten and build up the essential meanings of the poems as wholes, and have at the same time each a separate identity:

We bring deep-purple
Bird-foot violets.
We bring the hyacinth violet,
Sweet, bare, chill to the touch—
And violets whiter than the in-rush
Of your own white surf.

One sees more clearly the impulse behind our modern preoccupation with phrases and images, by comparing such lines as the above with the following verses, chosen almost at random from the less important names in *The Golden Treasury*:

Around my love and me the brooding hills,
Full of delicious murmurs, rise on high,
Closing upon this spot the summer fills,
And over which there rules the summer sky.

¹ Carl Sandburg.

Behind us on the shore down there the sea
 Roars roughly, like a fierce pursuing hound;
 But all *this* hour is calm for her and me;
 And now another hill shuts out the sound.
 The green exuberant branches overhead
 Sport with the golden magic of the sun,
 Here quite shut out, here like rare jewels shed
 To fright the glittering lizards as they run. . . .¹

Despite their conscientious poeticisms, these stanzas are not poetry but descriptive prose. They give a picture, as prose does, but the landscape takes on no life. It does not change its being and become a scene in which all the sense-objects appeal to the senses of the mind—to the inner eyes and ears and fingers and palates to which, for example, the laden table in "The Eve of St. Agnes" appeals. The poetic terminology is there, but it adorns a flat photograph which has none of the deeper meaning incident to an idea or a feeling, as a spark is incident to the flame; such meaning as has, for example, this metaphor from Shelley:

. . . there are spread
 On the blue surface of thine airy surge,
 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
 Of some fierce Mænad, even from the dim verge
 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
 The locks of the approaching storm. . . .

8

"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 "I never know what you are thinking. Think."
 I think we are in rat's alley
 Where the dead men lost their bones.
 "What is that noise?"

The wind under the door.

¹ Arthur O'Shaughnessy, "Lynmouth."

"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
 Nothing again nothing.

"Do

"You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
 "Nothing?"

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—

It's so elegant

So intelligent

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?

"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

"With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?

"What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

Or, again:

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf

Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind

Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,

Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.

And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors:

Departed, have left no addresses.

By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept. . . .

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,

Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.

At my back in a cold blast I hear

The rattle of bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.

A rat crept softly through the vegetation

Dragging its slimy belly on the bank

While I was fishing in the dull canal

On a winter evening round behind the gashouse

Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
 And on the king my father's death before him.
 White bodies naked on the low damp ground
 And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
 Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.
 But at my back from time to time I hear
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in soda water
 ET O CES VOIX D'ENFANTS, CHANTANT DANS LA
 COUPOLE!

Here we are very definitely not surprised by a "fine excess." Nor are we surprised by the fact that a serious mind in its most serious moments is a conglomerate mixture of fragmentary impressions; that those aspects of life and death which have been enduring and persistent throughout the record of man's thoughts have, through that long progress in millions of minds, associated themselves with almost every known aspect of sight and sound and feeling—the trivial as well as the traditionally significant. This is a knowledge we all have of ourselves, and when the controlling critical faculty is in abeyance, either in sleep or in madness, reality is gone; for reality is the realisation of the connections existing between obscure and separate impressions.

Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table.

Ophelia occasions no surprise in us, because we know well enough that her reality is a different thing from ours—or that she has abandoned all reality except her own—and that we may never guess from her words exactly what she is saying. The connections are lost.

Mr. Eliot's surprises, in the quotations above, are closer

to madness, to the dream-state of suspended consciousness, than they are to poetry. That is to say, in the dream state everything seems of equal importance, whereas in poetry everything is important in the proportion to which it is light and shade to the meaning of the whole. In "The Waste Land," we have a series of mental processes which mirror certain phases of the unconscious mind of the individual and the corresponding mind of the race—an ambitious project, indeed; one in which any poet might expect to fail.¹ And the failure is, it seems to me, apparent. There are beautiful passages which in themselves arouse in the reader the associative train of thought which in the past emerged from Everyman's deepest struggle with life, into the commemorative ritual of vegetation; and in these passages the reader's mind is, in terms of its own experience, going through a sort of Agon in which death is a fertility productive of life:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the crickets no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is a shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock)
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

In addition to being, from the prosodiac point of view, exquisite, this is poetry of the deep mind. Its meaning is not to be caught in any words but its own, and we cannot say what it means although we know perfectly well. Its truth belongs to the parts of the mind in which time does not exist

¹ "The Pot of Earth," by Archibald MacLeish, is a far more successful effort to do the same thing. Its best is no better than best of "The Waste Land," but it is more consistently successful, more deeply realised, and contains much incidental beauty.

since everything is always present at once; where we are most truly ourselves and yet at the same time are all men who ever lived; where death and life are indistinguishable from pure being. When Mr. Eliot writes poetry we have no need of his ingeniously interpretive disciples, nor of his notes. We have no need to learn that he has read *The Golden Bough* or the works of the Jane Harrison-Jessie Weston school. Most of his readers will have read these books themselves, and if Mr. Eliot had written "The Waste Land" with what he would call a "pure inspiration," an uninitiated reader would apprehend from him the essential meaning of these books without having looked at them. Footnotes and references are enlightening for a complete appreciation of, let us say, *The Divine Comedy*, for Dante's symbolism is lost to us in its detailed significance. Contemporary poetry, however, should "contain within itself the principle of its own integrity," its own evidence. Being contemporary, it will obviously be compact of all that has made the present; but that knowledge, that associative imagery, must be *contributive only*. It must merge into a whole which is intelligible. The poet's unconscious mind alone might conceivably produce poetry; the racial mind has often produced ritual in which the poetry of earth is latent. But when the poet consciously appropriates ritual (as distinguished from the meaning of the ritual as it exists in his own mind) and combines this with his own subconscious imitation of his unconscious—then I consider his inspiration impure, and his abilities wasted. Our modern knowledge, the muddle of thought and sensation and fact and memory which so confuses our thinking, is certain of assimilation in a mind which has not lost hold on its own reality—that is, in a mind which either sees a tentative meaning in life, or looks unweariedly for a certain kind of meaning. And the poetry of this type of mind will be the opposite of formless; it will employ the minutiae of matter and the form of the phrase toward one end; and

although it will increasingly avail itself of our knowledge of the mind, it will not make the realistic picture of that mind its objective. The first two quotations from "The Waste Land" have ultimately only this as objective, whatever may be the idea for which Mr. Eliot used them as illustrative material. For if the unconscious mind is the objective, Spenser's "Epithalamium" may be native to a river afloat with rubbish; Marvell's chariot of Time, forever at our backs with mortal intent, may well be associated with the eternal toot behind us in the street of motors bringing unexpected dissolution. In the unconscious mind, as in these passages, nothing is terrible, nothing is funny, nothing is good, nothing is important because everything is equally important. These qualities of values are closer to the surface of personality; they are the results of the kind of reality gleaned only from the world around us, and they should test the unconscious material in its egress. In these passages we have no testing done for us; we must do it for ourselves. The poet's burden falls upon the reader, and obviously the reader cannot become the poet, to whom the associations are inevitably clear; nor can he attain the inhuman eye and ear of a god for whom everything might well be equally important and unimportant: Baudelaire: hypocrite lecteur! mom semblable —mon frere! Venus Anadyomene with dirty finger nails and a feline smell; shrimps for dinner and death for us all; an old man dying; bats with baby faces; London Bridge is falling down; a harlot in a Spanish cape; Christ on the Cross and Sweeney among the nightingales; the broad-backed hippopotamus and the Paraclete; the sailor home from sea, and the typist home for tea; the Eternal Footman snickers and holds our coats but we wear the bottoms of our trousers rolled. . . .

The discrete fragments of experience are all we can find in most modern poetry. Our civilisation has undermined the communal certainties of life, and every man must remake

his world for himself. We have much knowledge but little wisdom, for we have no idea what is to be done to make this knowledge useful in any except a material sense. It is unilluminating, a dead weight, unless we find for ourselves something of supreme importance to which it contributes. Mr. Eliot, who may be too excellent a critic for his own peace as a poet, believes seriously that the mind of one's own age is more important than the individual mind which tries to comprehend it in poetry, and Mr. Eliot himself I believe to be a highly serious poet, trying to interpret our bewildering age. But he succeeds generally in mirroring it only; in catching the tone of Nihilism which is abroad, in portraying realistically the mind which knows nothing because anything may be true and everything may be untrue. I have stressed his highly interesting use of the unconscious mind, because I want to make it very clear that here his issues are confused, and he is being torn between the scientific and the poetic methods. He is subordinating his own criticism of life to a pseudo-scientific criticism of the data of life, and the result is an intellectually formulated picture of the material of poetry; a picture which is, by and large, meaningless. Despite his keen intelligence, he is only occasionally a poet. His methods are too reasonable, in the Eighteenth Century meaning of the word, and his results are thereby unreal.

If, however, it is Mr. Eliot's purpose to abnegate himself—to become depersonalised for the purposes of poetry—and to reflect in so far as is possible the mass mind which he considers so much more important than his own—if this is his purpose, one cannot pretend to judge the results. Only the poet's own mind can produce poetry, according to most creeds, and the result of any such depersonalisation as I suspect is Mr. Eliot's purpose would seem always to have an underlying tone analogous to the ventriloquist speech of a plaster cast model labelled "The Spirit of the Twentieth Century." But in so far as we recognise the delineation of this

spirit, we must admit that Mr. Eliot has caught its likeness. There is the same lack of meaning traceable to the fear of controverting facts on the strength of the intuitions; the same fear of going behind causes to significance. There is the same incomprehensibility of imaginative meanings, the same abrupt recovery from anything which might be thought sentimental. And there is the same contentment with the trivial aspects of important emotions; the same tyrannical sway of the one great emotion of futility, due to our inability to reconcile thought and feeling.

For example, this early sonnet of Miss Millay's—written in a phase she has long outgrown—is a good illustration of the excessive fear of being serious about anything:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year,
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
I will protest you with my favorite vow.
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,
And vows were not so brittle as they are,
But so it is, and nature has contrived
To struggle on without a break thus far,—
Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.

This is excellent light verse, and if I had not so often heard it proclaimed as poetry I should not waste time over it. If humanity and not biology gives us our standards—and the standards of poetry are those of humanity—this is a tragic theme, which Miss Millay chose to treat flippantly. The flippancy is not that of irony; there is no suggestion of contrast here between the biological and the spiritual aspects of love. The biological informs the whole, and so, for the purposes

of poetry, the result is entirely trivial. It is hardly fair to contrast one of our best sonnets with one of Miss Millay's worst, but Drayton's "Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part," will illustrate the point. Drayton's sonnet is as far as possible from portentousness and melodrama, but it is a serious treatment of the transience of passion.

Before I leave the subject of disillusionment, of the Modern Meaninglessness, I should like to illustrate it with two quotations. The first, from Miss Sitwell, seems to me an excellent statement, in prose, of an intellectual attitude:

But I am sad, and by the wrinkled lake
Where the great mauve flowers will never wake,
But drip with sleep and dew, I read this thin
Dry, withered book of delicate swanskin

And find a tale of an Olympian glade
Where Psyche has become a kitchen maid;
The world, that pitiful old catch penny,
Whines at her booth for pence, and finds too many,

Showing the gods no larger than ourselves
Twittering bird-like from the rocky shelves
Of this Olympus, and no prophecy
They roar, but whisper triviality.

I can find no note of poetry here, despite the poetical phrases for which Miss Sitwell is famous. The conception is not realised for the reader, and the calm statement of fact has itself the tone of a whispered triviality. The following, however, from Conrad Aiken, seems to me to present the same attitude of helplessness confronted with a dry ocean bed where once were life-giving waters of wisdom and faith. The difference is that Mr. Aiken has made a poetically realised mood of this attitude, rather than a factual statement or a realistic and depersonalised picture of a mind experiencing it. In other words, the poetry is such that when we read it

we are not listening to ideas; we are feeling acutely, so that we learn a new emotional tone for future thought:

Speak out, old wise-men! Now, if ever, we need you.
Cry loudly, lift shrill voices like magicians
Against this baleful dusk, this wail of rain!
But you are nothing. Your pages turn to water
Under my fingers: cold, cold and gleaming,
Arrowy in the darkness, rippling, dripping—
All things are rain. Myself, this lighted room,
What are we but a murmurous pool of rain?
The slow arpeggios of it, liquid, sibilant,
Thrill and thrill in the dark. World-deep I lie
Under a sky of rain. Thus lies the sea-shell
Under the rustling twilight of the sea;
No gods remember it; no understanding
Cleaves the long darkness with a sword of light.
Now the great wheel of darkness and low clouds
Whirs and whirls in heaven with dripping rim;
Against the ice-white wall of light in the west
Skeleton trees bow down in a stream of air.
Leaves, black leaves and smoke, are blown on the wind;
Mount upward past my window; swoop again;
In a sharp silence, loudly, loudly falls
The first cold drop, striking the shrivelled leaf.
Doom and dusk for the earth! Upward I reach
To draw chill curtains and shut out the dark,
Pausing an instant, with uplifted hand,
To watch, between black ruined portals of cloud,
One star,—the tottering portals fall and crush it.
Here are a thousand books! here is the wisdom
Alembicked out of dust, or out of nothing;
Choose now the weightiest words, most golden page,
Most sombrely musicked line; hold up these lanterns,—
These paltry lanterns, wisdoms, philosophies,—
Above your eyes, against this wall of darkness;
And you'll see—what? One hanging strand of cobweb;
A window-sill a half-inch deep in dust.

The strength of this lies in the fact that it is a personally felt mood which is at once as eternal as humanity, and very

typical of our age. Here are the wise men who said so much that has turned out to be nothing; the thousands of books, some of them doubtless chanting the Shakespeherian Rag, so elegant and so intelligent, and in one of which the Sweet Thames is doubtless importuned to run softly, with no mention of the cigarette butts or whatever analogous rubbish littered it in the Sixteenth Century. They are all here, but we are gratefully left to cite for ourselves whatever pertinent details the poetry arouses in us. The mood is so communicated that the very act of denying all truth is an affirmation of the spirit.

For the truth of the spirit has nothing to do with the choice of optimism or pessimism, and I want to stress this fact because in speaking of the nihilism of modern poetry, I may have seemed to be complaining of a lack of sanguine heartiness, to be asking for sugar-coated pills of hope. Great poetry has an instinctive note of sadness; "unpleasantness" Mr. Eliot calls it, and it is unpleasant in that it never compromises with or evades this fundamental issue: life and death are both sad and unpleasant, and yet together they constitute the only certainty we have; the frail shield we hold up against the stars. The fact that there is no rational meaning for either life or death accounts for the existence of poets, and in a sense furnishes the motive and point of view of all poetry.

So when I complain of the lack of belief and affirmation in much modern verse, I mean only that, for some reason which has nothing to do with superior intelligence but much to do, probably, with the tone of popular thought, it is the product of people who tacitly deny that there is a spirit, or that there is a truth for such spirit as they might grant existence; who deny, in other words, the whole integrity and *raison d'être* of poetry. No one could object to such a point of view, if those who held it refrained from trying to write the poetry in which they really disbelieve.

When Keats wrote of life:

. . . The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despair;
 Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond the morrow,

he was concentrating all the sad injustice of existence into one picture, but he was at the same time emphasising his unshaken faith in an immortal beauty. The reality of this beauty he could not prove to any one else, but it was for him the solid rock on which life might be founded. And unless our imaginations are to rot away, we must all have some such rock to build on. Even if our rock is nothing more than the stony certainty of annihilation, it will serve as a point of observation. Standing on it, we have a point of view which gives pattern to the vista, a background of horizon which serves as a scale of values for the detail of life. This is Mr. Housman's rock of faith:

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
 Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
 Think rather—call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
 The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.

.
 Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation;
 All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all are vain:
 Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation—
 Oh, why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?

And Mr. de la Mare:

Had the gods loved me, I had lain
 Where darnel is, and thorn,
 And the wild night-bird's nightlong strain
 Trembles in boughs forlorn.

Nay, but they loved me not; and I
Must needs a stranger be,
Whose every exiled day gone by
Aches with their memory.

The philosophies of such men as Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edward Thomas, and Masefield—to mention only a few of the best known names—are hardly cheerful, and even Mr. Santayana, who is fortunate enough to be able to say:

To me the faiths of old are daily bread;
I bless their hope, I bless their will to save. . . .
And, being so much kinsman to the dead
I walk contented to the peopled grave.

even he feels most keenly that

Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
That lights the pathway but one step ahead
Across a void of mystery and dread.

But all poets have felt this. Our factual knowledge has always been, and will always be, a feeble illumination when the night falls and we are forced to rely on it. And to-day, when the materials of life are multiplying and the faith they once subserved is becoming hollow, Shelley's words are more than ever true:

We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life.

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